

HB 0983: State Personnel – Maryland Department of Health – Pay Rates
March 5, 2024

SUPPORT

Good afternoon, Chairman Barnes and committee members,

My name is Bennett Robley and I am a teacher at RICA-Baltimore. On behalf of the teachers at RICA, we seek a favorable report for HB0983. The legislation addresses an oversight four years in the making. In 2020, when Senate Bill 693/CH576 was passed, it provided a desperately needed pay differential to mental health workers who are very difficult to recruit and retain. The bill also required facilities to have corrections trained security personnel proportionate to the size and security needs of the facility.

The impact of the 2020 legislation was positive and helped with the retention of experienced residential staff here at RICA Baltimore. Additionally, the new security team has helped immeasurably with managing violent student outbursts. Before 2020, instructional staff were the only staff available to respond to violent incidents and perform physical restraint during the school day. Teaching staff are still trained and expected to report to violent codes and go hands on, but the addition of the security team has significantly reduced the need for teachers to engage in physical restraints outside of our classrooms.

Despite this vast improvement, the omission of bargaining unit G and educational staff from the bill, we have continued to struggle with hiring and retaining educational staff. Every year, we have at least 2 out of 6 state teaching positions open. One position we haven't been able to fill for over 2 years. The other has been filled twice but only with candidates that were already staff at RICA Baltimore, as an instructional assistant, or were previously employed at the school decades ago and are returning from retirement. We have not been able to recruit new teachers from outside of RICA Baltimore in more than four years.

When candidates decline offers of employment, they frequently state that they do not wish to be 12-month employees and fear for their safety. It takes a rare type of teacher to take a state position, working 8-hour days and through summer while assuming the risks to life and limb in this facility. State Teachers, as 12-month employees, perform many additional duties above and beyond teaching compared to a standard 10month teacher. We are tasked with supervising children whenever school closes early for heat, lack of water, or inclement weather. We come in on snow days to run programming, and each of us performs additional critical duties such as ensuring the school is compliant with testing obligations.

State Teachers are a critical part of the mental health infrastructure, yet we are not afforded the same pay differential as all the other colleagues in our facilities. This is a significant drag on morale for current teachers and is preventing the benefit of the additional pay to recruit new talent.

A second, more important drag on morale, is the lack of acknowledgement that teachers are still being assaulted and we do not receive the same pay differential for assuming the same risks as our coworkers. Attached are photos of a handful of assaults that have occurred at RICA Baltimore against teaching staff this school year.

As I write this, we have just passed the 110-day mark of the school year. In that time, we had 25 educational staff assaulted out of 45. Some teachers have been assaulted upwards of 4 times this year alone. We have been bitten, hit with furniture, punched, kicked, given concussions, spit on, and had sharp objects (like a pencil) held to a teacher's throat. We have had students openly state their plans to murder staff.

It is important to note that RICA has less than 50 students currently. In the past we had more than 100 students enrolled. With the hospital overstay crisis, there is more need than ever for RICA to be fully functioning and operating at full capacity. Our facility has been unable to hire needed staff and even if we were fully staffed, the acuity level of the students we are accepting is so extreme that we would still be hard pressed to admit more students given the level of impulsivity and violence our population currently exhibits. The overstay crisis has made working in our facility exponentially more dangerous compared to previous years.

Teachers are a vital part of keeping RICA Baltimore functioning and helping children in need. We are being injured just like our coworkers. In fact, as of today (February 29th) we have recorded a minimum of 106 "Physical Assault on Staff" referrals or as we call them, PA's. There are very aggressive students who have averaged around 7 PAs on staff each, with one student recording over 25 assaults on their own. Please note that a PA referral is only generated when staff is hit, it does not record all the other times we have not been hit by flying furniture or wayward punches. What needs to be acknowledged is that security responds to violent incidents after they happen. Teachers are the front line, utilizing verbal de-escalation techniques to manage student behaviors. When our efforts fail, and violence occurs, we are the first to feel it. Security then responds to assist us. We still get injured.

There are not many state teachers, and we are a very rare breed. We have expertise that can only be learned working in facilities like RICA. We are battle tested and experts in a very specialized field. Teachers that stay at MDH facilities have no expectation of getting rich and famous. We don't take the job because it's an easy day. We stay because we believe that the children in our facilities, many of which have no one, deserve caring adults who will educate them. We only ask that we are given the same respect as our coworkers and acknowledgement of the risks we face.

For these reasons, we ask the committee for a favorable report on HB0983.

Examples of injuries sustained in RICA Baltimore's Classrooms:





