

Susan D. Rich, MD, MPH, DFAPA

House Bill: HB 539 Senate Bill: SB 567

Dear Esteemed Legislators:

It is with honor and urgency that I speak to you on behalf of Maryland's transitional age college students in support of the Cameron Carden Act. Although I do not speak on behalf of any of these organizations, I am past President of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry of Greater Washington, a member of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Distinguished Fellow in the American Psychiatric Association, and a member of the American Medical Association. I give annual lectures at George Washington University and have given lectures and grand rounds at University of Maryland Student Health Services, Johns Hopkins University, Georgetown University, Springfield Hospital in Sykesville, and many other teaching hospitals across the US, Canada and Lithuania. I have not been paid by anyone to give this testimony and am not here today speaking as anyone's psychiatrist. I have met with Cameron Carden and have administered questionnaires for purposes of assessment but am not his psychiatrist and am not speaking today in that role. I have come here as a staunch advocate for all young people with mental health issues that are prevalent, under-reported, and under acknowledged among the technical schools, community college, college, and university campuses in our state.

As a private practice child/adolescent psychiatrist in Montgomery County since 2006, I have seen many of Maryland's college students in my home office. Like other transitional age youth, college students are still finding themselves and their place in the world. Most of the college students I have seen as new patients have had difficulty transitioning to college, many of them leaving school in the middle of the semester due to mental health reasons, life stressors, or other extraordinary circumstances. Typically, if they are doing well enough to make it to the end of the semester, they are usually able to stay where they are until they are able to transfer to a different school.

The cost of education for individuals and families is extraordinary. I know something about this as I paid my way through an undergraduate degree in microbiology, a graduate degree in public health and a medical degree. The issue in question is that of reimbursement for tuition at in-state universities if an extraordinary circumstance happens after the deadline for reimbursement has passed. Cameron Carden's case exemplifies such a circumstance. He had grown up in the Annapolis area, excelled academically and in football at the Annapolis Christian School, graduated from the St. Thomas More Prep School in Massachusetts and entered the Western New England University in Massachusetts to play football as a freshman. At that point, he was a well-adjusted college student athlete with good self-esteem, resilience, well-spoken, and good citizenship. As the youngest of his siblings, Cameron really wanted to be back in Maryland closer to family where his parents could see him play football. His coach in Massachusetts had graduated from Salisbury University, which influenced Cameron's decision to transfer there. My understanding is that he loved the campus at Salisbury, was impressed by the school's mission, and was excited that his parents could attend some of his games. Unfortunately, a series of traumatic experiences early in his first semester led to him developing fears of attending class, heightened stress response, and other symptoms that progressively worsened leading to him leaving school. At this point, Cameron meets diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with severe panic attacks that have affected his ability to function in social situations.

How did a socially confident, independent, well-adjusted student athlete end up with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at one of our state's college campuses? While putting away some supplies during his theater class, Cameron witnessed racist graffiti for the first time in his life painted outside the theater room. The graffiti included a derogatory sexual comment and demoralizing racial slur. His heart started racing, he became dysphoric and disassociated, felt uneasy about the people around him, and very suspicious that it may be someone in class who had done it. In that frightened state, he and the student with him told the theater professor who simply said, "Don't let those 'pr*cks' drive you away" (paraphrased). The professor reported it to the administration, but nothing substantial was done other than calling the maintenance crew to paint over the graffiti.

When the graffiti reappeared overnight with even more violent and slanderous content, it confirmed Cameron's

anxiety and fear that the school would not be able to keep him safe. Around that time, while walking to class, he heard someone shout the N* word to him – again, another activation of his already traumatized nervous system.

Address: 12640 Rolling Road, Potomac, MD 20854; Phone: 301-251-1190

Why did these symptoms happen to Cameron? The initial experience then the subsequent retraumatizing events were shocks to his naïve nervous system, having been relatively cocooned in predominantly private Caucasian schools where he was included in all aspects of the schools and sports. The demeaning, insulting words left him feeling frightened, suspicious/paranoid and anticipating other physical or socially disenfranchising situations happening. This emotional trauma led to trouble sleeping, focusing, and attending classes out of increasing anxiety, panic symptoms, and fear. He had never experienced this degree of hate, slander, and trauma of systemic racism that other students may have been more desensitized to. He was unable to speak with his parents about the incident when they came the following weekend because of a sense of emotional numbness, disbelief, and despondency. His mother noticed these symptoms and tried to talk with him about it, but he was suppressing it out of not wanting her and his dad to worry about him. Living in that community with triggers for the anxiety eventually led him to call his parents to go home the day after Parents' Weekend. When he and his parents met with the school, the attitude, and messages he heard from administration were confusing – “If you leave now that the deadline has passed [for tuition reimbursement], your parents will lose their money (from tuition).” He assured them that it did not matter, that his mental health was more important and that he would pay his parents back.

While Cameron has moved on with his life and education here in Maryland, he and his parents are having to bear the burden of owing Salisbury University the tuition for his first semester there. He is also living with a condition that has taken away his love of and an aspiring career in football. His day-to-day life in his current work in public health and learning environment has been affected. The academics are triggering his feelings of distress and kindling his fears ignited during the episode at Salisbury University. He often has difficulty sleeping and frequently wakes up in the middle of the night, having trouble getting back to sleep. All of these symptoms, in my opinion, has been affected by the horrific racist graffiti that spawned PTSD. Cameron's mental health functioning was impacted by the catastrophic and extraordinary circumstances that should have been considered when Cameron requested his tuition reimbursement.

There are many other students like Cameron who decide to leave shortly after the reimbursement deadline has passed, for example COVID related mental health issues. I recently had a young lady who had not attended classes the entire fall of 2021 at a college in South Carolina and just recently was able to get her college paperwork accepted for reimbursement for medical reasons (due to mental health concerns). Since private elementary and secondary schools have tuition insurance options, perhaps we should consider that in our state. It should not take an act of Congress or the state Legislature for this to happen, but here we are, asking you for that to happen.

I feel very strongly as a child/adolescent psychiatrist that The Cameron Carden Act is an example of what we can do in our state to help support families who are already putting so much into their children's education. Thank you so much for considering my testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan D Rich MD MPH

Electronically signed/4-4-22 at 2:13 pm

Susan D. Rich, MD, MPH, DFAPA
Child/Adolescent & Adult Psychiatrist

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