

February 8, 2024

Chairwoman Pena Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and distinguished members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

NAMI MD is pleased to provide testimony in support of HB728- Health Insurance- Qualified Resident Enrollment Program (Access to Care Act).

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a statewide network of more than 58,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland is a non-profit that is dedicated to providing education, support, and advocacy for persons with mental illnesses, their families and the wider community.

**HB 728 addresses critical health disparities faced by the immigrant community in Maryland by expanding the Affordable Care Act to all Marylanders, regardless of their immigration status, by a simple act of requiring MHBE to request a 1332 waiver to allow Maryland residents, regardless of immigration status, to purchase insurance on the Exchange.** HB 728 represents an important milestone in our journey toward creating a resilient healthcare system.

This bill is about making sure that hard-working, taxpaying Marylanders can have access to the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange and the opportunity to pay for health care insurance. This bill is a win-win. It is not only in the best interest of the individuals and families but also in the best interest of the state as reducing the uninsured population results in savings in ER care because people can access more affordable, preventative care.

The Affordable Care Act has allowed more than 28 million people across the country to gain access to affordable health care. In Maryland, since the establishment of the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange (MHBE) in 2011, which allows individuals and small businesses to purchase affordable health coverage, **our uninsured rate has almost halved from 12% to 6%.**

Although Maryland has taken bold steps to decrease the uninsured rate, a staggering 30% of the uninsured are denied healthcare coverage solely because of their immigration status. This systematic and structural inability to access routine, comprehensive, affordable care has led uninsured Marylanders to seek out the most expensive type of care there is: emergency departments. When individuals have access to primary care, it results in higher rates of early detection and better long-term management of chronic diseases and serious illnesses, a decrease in mortality rates, and an increase in overall healthier and wealthier communities.

Multiple states across the country have established comprehensive programs to extend coverage to immigrants regardless of their immigration status, and despite the profound cultural

Kathryn S. Farinholt  
Executive Director  
National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland

**Contact:** Morgan Mills  
Compass Government Relations  
Mmills@compassadvocacy.com

contributions immigrants make to the state, along with their essential role in the Maryland workforce and millions in contributions to society and the economy through federal, state, and local taxes - they are still ineligible for the Affordable Care Act.

Over the last several decades, the need for healthcare coverage has been a consistent priority for Maryland's immigrant community. Maryland has the fifth-highest percentage of the immigrant population - leaving one of the most significant percentages of residents left without care. HB 728 is a crucial step in addressing access to care for all Marylanders.

HB 728 is not only critical legislation for our undocumented community, but it is also sound policy for the state. Firstly, this bill presents no fiscal burden on the state budget and involved actors in the process, including MHBE, have expressed that the waiver can be submitted and individuals enrolled with current resources. Furthermore, having access to the individual marketplace and therefore, easier access to routine, primary care will result in a decrease in the number of emergency room visits that uninsured individuals with illnesses make, and would decrease uncompensated care costs. Uncompensated care costs ultimately affect everyone's insurance rates. According to our hospitals, the State is spending between \$120—170M per year in uncompensated care for emergency department services for residents who do not have insurance, and in some cases that is simply because they cannot easily purchase it. They end up in the emergency departments because they do not have access to primary or preventive health care. Lastly, our emergency department wait times are among the highest in the country—these could be significantly decreased by making sure that ALL our residents have access to preventive care.

Access to routine yearly checkups will ensure that our undocumented immigrant children, youth, and adults live better, healthier, and more productive lifestyles that ultimately make our communities more vibrant.

This common-sense legislation is uncontentious and aligns Maryland with its values of protecting life and treating all people with dignity, respect, and care. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report.