

February 21, 2024

Chair Delegate Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk  
Vice Chair Delegate Bonnie Cullison  
Health and Government Operations Committee  
Room 241, House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: HB411 – Public Health - Opioid Overdose Reversal Drugs - Standing Orders

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

I am Kathleen O'Brien, Ph.D and I have spent my whole career dedicated to quality Behavioral Healthcare, including addiction treatment. **I urge a favorable report on House Bill 411**

Previously, I was the CEO of Walden Sierra Behavioral Health, a nationally-recognized behavioral health organization that served counties across Southern Maryland until 2018 with a comprehensive integrated continuum of care for individuals suffering from the effects of substance use, trauma, and other brain-based conditions. I am now the CEO of Walden Wise, a non-profit which focuses on the emotional health of children. I am submitting this testimony personally and not representing my organization.

I support this legislation because Maryland must ensure our first responders and health professionals have access to all the opioid reversal drug approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration. This legislation will require updates to the state's so-called "Standing Order" to include all FDA-approved opioid reversal drugs. This will ensure we are ready for the introduction of new, more effective, or less expensive medicines that may be approved in the future. With this change, Maryland would join several other states who have already made this change to their standing orders.

The opioid and overdose crisis continues, and it has evolved as Fentanyl has taken hold as the cause of 81 percent of overdose deaths in Maryland. Despite all the amazing work by first responders, health care professionals, and many others across the state, there does not seem to be an end in sight. Governor Moore has shown tremendous leadership in his first year in office, broadening the state's response to opioids and overdoses by enhancing coordination between and across all levels of government. But just as the opioid epidemic is evolving and ever changing, so too must Maryland's response. Now is the time to take steps to prepare for the future of this crisis, like updating the standing order.

We must take meaningful steps to treat the long-term and underlying cause of this crisis: the disease of addiction itself. But for addiction treatment to be an option for those who suffer an overdose, they must be able to be revived from an overdose and survive to get into treatment. Ensuring our first responders and health professionals have access to all FDA-approved the opioid reversal drugs will help.

To effectively treat addiction, we need to invest in the state's behavioral health system and to foster collaboration, innovation, and improvement in the delivery of behavioral health services across Maryland. The limited access to behavioral health services and fragmented integration of mental health

and substance use care within the broader healthcare system too often leads to delayed treatment, worsening of conditions, and adverse health outcomes. A shortage of behavioral health professionals also poses a significant challenge. Variations in the quality of behavioral health services which impact the overall effectiveness of the behavioral health system.

Disparities in behavioral health outcomes among underserved populations, including racial and ethnic minorities, low-income individuals, and rural communities, perpetuate inequalities in access, treatment, and outcomes. Culturally competent care is essential to address these disparities and ensure equitable access to high-quality behavioral health services for all individuals.

With Gov. Moore providing excellent leadership on the continuing and evolving crisis of opioids and overdoses, we must harness the collective expertise, resources, and collaborative power needed to address the complex challenges faced by Marylanders. Changing our thinking from a crisis mindset to planning and preparing long term will allow us to address the underlying disease of addiction more comprehensively and ensure we are prepared to address the next opioid or other drug like xylazine that could emerge.

Ensuring access to all FDA-approved opioid reversal drug approved is an important step forward so that together, we can create a future where every individual has equitable access to comprehensive behavioral health services, where disparities are diminished, and where innovative approaches lead to better health outcomes and improved well-being for all. Instead of being gripped by the crisis of opioids and overdoses, Maryland can be a beacon of hope, driving real and meaningful change in the lives of our communities.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. **I strongly urge you to issue a favorable report on House Bill 411.**

Sincerely,

Kathleen O'Brien, Ph.D