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HB 849

Maryland Commission to Study the Dental Hygienist Shortage - Establishment Hearing of the House Health & Government Operations Committee

March 4, 2025

1:00 PM

FAVORABLE

The **Community Health Workers Empowerment Coalition of Maryland (CHWEC-MD)** is a coalition of CHWs and those who train, educate, support, and employ them across the state of Maryland. Our collective goals are to 1) reduce disparities in healthcare access and outcomes for Marylanders by expanding access to CHWs, 2) ensure that the voices of Maryland's CHWs are represented in the creation of laws and policies that impact the profession, and 3) advocate with CHWs for solutions that address systemic inequities that they experience in the field, including a lack of reimbursement for their services. We stand in **strong support of HB 849**, which would establish the Maryland Commission to Study the Dental Hygienist Shortage.

The lack of dental hygienists in Maryland directly impacts access to dental care for patients and is a barrier to improving oral health. When patients cannot access preventative dental care in the community, they run the risk of experiencing cavities, needing surgical interventions such as a root canal or tooth extraction, and experiencing chronic pain. Further, patients may seek care in emergency rooms to address pain, impacting the capacity of our ERs to meet emergency needs. Maryland must develop a plan and take significant steps towards addressing the workforce shortage.

HB 849 would not only require stakeholders to study the workforce shortage for dental hygienists but would also task the Commission with determining how to better integrate community health workers in dental settings to address gaps in continuity of care and patient education. A CHW is a frontline public health worker that is a trusted member of their community with a deep understanding of the barriers to attaining good health that their community faces. They often share similar lived experiences with the communities they serve, which puts them in the position to be a connection between healthcare providers and the community. They not only provide education and information to patients on health, but they also help keep patients connected to care by addressing social determinants of health like access to food, transportation, and housing. In dental settings in particular, CHWs can provide education

to patients on how to achieve good oral health through dental hygiene practices and dietary changes that help prevent cavities and dental diseases.

Thank you for your consideration, and we respectfully urge this Committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** report for **HB 849**. Should you have any questions about this testimony, please contact Ashley Woolard at woolarda@publicjustice.org, or call 410-625-9409 ext. 224.