



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

SPONSOR TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1066
(COMMISSION ON BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE TREATMENT AND ACCESS -
MEMBERSHIP AND WORK GROUPS)

Delegate Sheila Ruth
March 5, 2025

By now, it is impossible to deny that substance use is a public health crisis - one does not need to wait long to see another heartbreaking story in the news of just how badly it has affected our state, or read updates on the messy legal battles about the use of money received in suits over the opioid crisis. It is difficult to find anyone who has not been touched by this epidemic - whether they have experienced it first-hand, or have loved ones who are suffering.

The time is long past to recognize that people with substance use disorders (SUDs) need treatment that not only works in helping them overcome addiction, but holistically helps them thrive in our society once again. We can all agree that our goal is to reduce substance use and the harms associated with it, and improve public health and safety. To do that, we must first truly understand the best ways to treat and then support those with SUDs, rather than simply treating them as criminals.

HB1066 aims to do so by creating a new workgroup in Maryland's Commission on Behavioral Health Care Treatment and Access that would study the ever-pressing issue of substance use in our state and recommend the best ways to address them.

Eight new members would be added to the Commission to include more holistic viewpoints regarding substance use and the issues surrounding it, from the organizational (a representative of a harm reduction services provider, an expert in drug policy reform, an individual with expertise providing housing services for those with or are in recovery from SUDs, and one in providing health care services to those experiencing homelessness) to the first-hand experiential (an individual with prior lived experience with an SUD, one seeking or receiving treatment for an SUD while incarcerated, and an individual with experience participating in a drug court program).

The Commission on Behavioral Health Care Treatment and Access currently has four existing workgroups: one regarding geriatric behavioral health, one regarding youth behavioral health and those with developmental disabilities and/or complex behavioral health needs, one regarding criminal justice-involved behavioral health, and one regarding behavioral health workforce development, infrastructure, coordination, and financing. These are all important groups that provide us with crucial

information we need to help our fellow Marylanders. However, substance use is a complex issue that cannot fit neatly into one of these existing workgroups. Although substance use is generally covered under the “Behavioral Health” umbrella, its needs vary enough from other behavioral health aspects that I believe it requires specific focus to ensure that we are achieving the best outcomes, particularly given the massive crisis we are facing now

As such, this bill would add a fifth workgroup regarding the improvement of health, social, and economic outcomes related to substance use. This workgroup would evaluate the availability, affordability, and accessibility of treatments and recovery support services (including housing and employment support) for those with SUDs in the State of Maryland, and the various effects the intervention of the criminal justice system has on these services and those who utilize them, such as:

- How many individuals are directed to the above services by the criminal justice system;
- The health outcomes of individuals who have received the above services after being mandated by the criminal justice system versus those who sought them voluntarily, including a review of current research on the efficacy of voluntary versus criminal justice system mandated treatment;
- The impact of current criminal justice involvement related to substance use on the health and well-being of individuals, their families, and their communities;
- The fiscal impact to the state and local governments resulting from current criminal justice involvement related to substance use;
- The equitability of how current criminal justice involvement related to substance use is applied; and
- The availability and accessibility of data on the above issues.

Ultimately, the workgroup would be charged with making any recommendations it deems necessary regarding potential alterations to state laws, policies, and practices in order to mitigate the harms related to the criminalization of substance use, with the end goal being improving the public health, safety, and well-being of the people of Maryland.

We need to recognize that those requiring help with substance use related issues need real support and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect - as the fellow members of our communities they are. That recognition requires an understanding of their needs - of what really works and what really does not - and a workgroup studying just that is the first step we need to take.

I ask for a favorable report on HB1066.