



March 5, 2025

**House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

HB 1066 - Commission on Behavioral Health Care Treatment and Access - Membership and Workgroups

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 100,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports HB1066 - Commission on Behavioral Health Care Treatment and Access - Membership and Workgroups. This would add an additional workgroup to the mandate of the Commission that would focus on substance use. This issue is of paramount importance but has not been adequately addressed thus far in the Commission’s work. Adding an additional work group is a commonsense way to ensure this important stakeholder group is reviewing these issues.

Issues related to substance use are significant drivers of costs in both the public behavioral health system and the criminal justice system. Substance use services cost over \$200 million each year in Baltimore City alone and make up around 1/3 of the costs in the public behavioral health system. Drug offenses also represent a significant number of arrests, prison admissions and state costs.

It is essential for the state to consider the effectiveness of these various approaches and investments. There is considerable debate around the effectiveness of arrest and criminal sanctions in helping individuals struggling with substance use disorder. Many see justice involvement as a helpful motivator for an individual to make the changes in their life to achieve recovery. Many others see the carceral system as fundamentally traumatic and disruptive to the bonds and supports needed to achieve recovery. BHSB tends to view harm reduction approaches that aim to improve public health and build relationships with people using drugs as a more effective intervention than court ordered treatment, but we admit there are differing views. A work group to review these different approaches and share recommendations would help policy makers to better understand these dichotomies.

It is reasonable and constructive for the Commission on Behavioral Health Care Treatment and Access to review how best to address substance use in our state and to provide recommendations. **We urge the House Health and Government Operations Committee to support HB1146.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142