

Testimony SUPPORTING HB 962 – Hospital Overstay (Del. Pena-Melnyk)
Submitted by: Danielle LeClair, University Park, MD

I am writing to express my strong support for Chairwoman Pena-Melnyk's legislation, HB 962, which would help children like my daughter, Patience.

I adopted Patience from foster care 8 years ago when she was 9 years old. She is a wonderful kid, but has a number of significant mental health issues (combined with developmental and intellectual disabilities) from the abuse that she suffered in her birth and foster homes.

Patience's mental health issues have unfortunately led to numerous hospitalizations for stabilization, and/or because she needs a higher level of care – inpatient, residential treatment, etc.

Let me lay out for you what the process looks like when your child has a significant mental health episode:

- First, you call 911 for an ambulance to take the child to the hospital (ER) – BUT, there are only a few hospitals in the approved geographic range for EMTs to transport children to. I believe that in Prince George's County, there are effectively zero pediatric ER beds; once you layer on mental illness, finding an ER gets even more limited/difficult.
- So, the child is typically taken to the closest ER – in our area, that's Luminis or UMMS Laurel. Neither have pediatric ERs, nor do they have psych ER beds for children (technically, UMMS Largo has 2 psych ER beds that can be used for adolescents, but adult males psych patients have easy access to children in that area).
- ERs want to get children out of the ER and discharged home or to an inpatient psych unit asap. But, there is such a shortage of inpatient psych beds in MD that children often "board" in ERs – sometimes for months.
- My daughter boarded at Luminis's ER for 9 days last year (and was exposed to adult male patients having some pretty scary behaviors).
- Patience boarded at UMMS Laurel and then UMMS Largo for 8 WEEKS last year because it was not safe for her to come home (health care professionals had already certified she needed a higher level of care) but – there were also no inpatient beds available in MD for a child with her level of Mental Health issues, so she was stuck in the ER.
- When a child boards in the ER, they do not get any schooling despite the Home and Hospital program through school districts (typically because the ER doesn't have staff/resources to help the child access that offered schooling); they do not see the sun; do not get any exercise; and basically lay in bed 24 hours a day getting no treatment.
- Maryland started a Hospital Overstay Program about 2 years ago – although it was not promoted at all (I found out about it after a desperate online search – the PG County Behavioral Health office didn't even know that the Hospital Overstay program existed until I informed them about it).
- Patience actually was accepted into the Hospital Overstay program 2 years ago at Salem Trust, but unfortunately, the state shut down Salem Trust. The only Hospital Overstay program remaining is at Brook Lane in Hagerstown.

- The only way to currently get a child into Hospital Overstay in Maryland is to **ALREADY HAVE ANOTHER MENTAL HEALTH PLACEMENT LINED UP**. This is absurd because the scarcity of psych ER beds, and psych inpatient beds for kids means that instead of going from the ER directly to Hospital Overstay, the child needs to be accepted into an inpatient bed or Residential Treatment Center first – even though there aren't enough beds in those programs! This is a Catch-22 that forces numerous kids to board in the ER for months instead of going to a humane Hospital Overstay program with schooling, exercise, and treatment.
- Last year, I begged the MD Department of Health to let my daughter into the Hospital Overstay program at Brook Lane after she had rotted in the ER at UMMS Largo for 8 weeks, exposed to adult male psych patients, no school, no treatment. Patience was rejected because there was no next mental health placement lined up.
- Instead, UMMS called CPS on me for “abandoning” her – despite the fact that their health care providers had already certified that she needed a higher level of Mental Health care and that it wasn't safe for her to come home; threatening to call CPS and actually calling CPS on parents of kids in ERs who need mental health treatment is sadly too common in Maryland and elsewhere – for-profit hospitals are squeezing parents and wasting county resources that are supposed to be used to actually investigate child abuse – not to push mentally ill kids out of ERs.
 - o See: <https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/community/public-health/hundreds-of-maryland-children-live-in-hospitals-FCLWTVRAZFARHKCP74RP5EFJNQ/>
 - o <https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/lawsuit-accuses-maryland-of-warehousing-foster-children-with-behavioral-health-issues-in-hospitals/>
- Maryland needs to at least quadruple its Hospital Overstay program – the need is there.
- HB 962 would greatly benefit children like my daughter and I hope the bill passes out of committee and through the full House of Delegates and MD Senate this year.