



CITIZENS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

INTERNATIONAL

In Support of HB 497: The Preventing Abduction in Youth Transport Act

On behalf of the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, a 56-year mental health watchdog that operates nationwide, including here in Maryland, I would like to extend our congratulations to Delegate Vaughn Stewart for introducing HB 487, a groundbreaking and essential initiative aimed at protecting our children and youths from unnecessary and harmful restraint practices in the industry transporting individuals to residential treatment facilities.

This bill is vital in addressing the dangerous, unregulated practice of "gooning," where vulnerable individuals can be forcibly transported, often drugged and restrained, to residential treatment facilities that have been exposed for abuse, neglect, and even causing fatalities. One of the most tragic examples of this practice, which drew national attention, occurred in February 2024, when a 12-year-old boy tragically died after being transported from New York to Trails Carolina wilderness camp in North Carolina. The boy was subjected to a restraint procedure that caused his death. This camp is operated by Family Help and Wellness that partners with Bluefire Wilderness, the latter offering out-of-state treatment for Maryland families.¹ This may include the use of the transport industry.

It is important to note that the forced transport and placement of youths without their consent may also violate the U.S. ratification of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, as practices like these can be classified as cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

In support of HB 487, I'd like to reference the *Journal of Legislation*, which in 2024, highlights the terrifying experiences of youth during such transport: "These men ask if you want to go 'the easy way or the hard way' before restraining you and carrying you out of your home, as you scream for help. They take you to the airport, eventually transporting you to an isolated facility for rebellious teenagers. Once at this facility, you are subject to a multitude of physical and mental abuse," including forced to take medication" and getting "slapped, verbally assaulted, and locked in solitary confinement for misbehaving."²

This is not an isolated incident, and there is currently no accountability for the abuse that occurs during the transportation process. Other states, like Oregon, have taken steps to regulate restraint use by prohibiting chemical, mechanical, and other forms of restraint in child-caring agencies and secure transport services.³ Maryland's HB 487 would go a step further, providing much-needed protections and accountability for children and youths during transport to a wide range of residential child care programs.

Further compounding these concerns, companies like Acadia Healthcare, which owns three substance abuse treatment centers in Maryland, are currently under investigation by the FBI, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Veterans Affairs for prioritizing profit over patient care.⁴ *The New York Times* has reported on their substance treatment centers, which have been marred by allegations of patient neglect and abuse.⁵ In addition, companies like Embark Behavioral Health, with two facilities in Maryland, recently closed three wilderness camps in Arizona, Oregon, and Wisconsin in the wake of public scrutiny over practices employed in these so-called "therapeutic" programs.⁶

Lastly, a 2023 report from *Psychiatric Services* called for immediate regulatory action to end the practices of restraint and seclusion rooms, citing the immense trauma and potential for lethal outcomes, including asphyxiation and cardiac events. HB 487 answers that call by extending stronger safeguards and protections for those most at risk while being transported to child residential facilities.

For all of these reasons, we wholeheartedly support HB 487. This bill is a necessary step toward ensuring the safety, dignity, and rights of those who are most vulnerable, and it will provide critical protections against the abuse and misuse of restraint in the behavioral transport industry.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ms. Jan Eastgate
 President
 Citizens Commission on Human Rights International
 6616 Sunset Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90028
 www/cchrint.org
 Tel: (323) 467 4242
 11 February 2025

Since 1969, CCHR has been instrumental in investigating abuses in the behavioral-mental health system, resulting in recognitions from state legislators and Members of Congress acknowledging its "outstanding and invaluable service to the community" and for the "contributions that CCHR has made at the local, national, and international level on behalf of mental health issues [which] are invaluable and reflect an organization devoted to the highest ideals of care and compassion toward their fellow man."

¹ <https://bluefirewilderness.com/b/wilderness-therapy/maryland/>

² Morgan Rubino, "MORE THAN TROUBLING: THE ALARMING ABSENCE OF 'TROUBLED TEEN INDUSTRY' REGULATION AND PROPOSALS FOR REFORM," *Journal of Legislation*, Vol 50., 2024, p, 431

³ <https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2021R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/SB710>

⁴ Jessica Silver-Greenberg, Katie Thomas, "Acadia Healthcare Says It Faces New Federal Investigations: Shares of the company, one of the largest chains of for-profit psychiatric

hospitals, were down 25 percent at one point,” *New York Times*, 27 Sept. 2024,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/27/business/acadia-federal-investigations.html>

⁵ “Fraud and Fakery at the Country’s Largest Chain of Methadone Clinics: Acadia Healthcare falsifies records at its methadone clinics and enrolls patients who aren’t addicted to opioids, a Times investigation found,” *The New York Times*, 8 Dec. 2024,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/07/health/acadia-methadone-clinics-fraud.html>;

⁶ “Wilderness Therapy Industry’s Decline Accelerated by Embark Behavioral Health’s Exit,” *Behavioral Health Business*, 23 Feb, 2024.