HOWARD COUNTY OFFICE OF COUNTY EXECUTIVE
3430 Courthouse Drive ▪ Ellicott City, Maryland 21043 ▪ 410-313-2013 Voice/Relay

Calvin Ball
Howard County Executive
cball@howardcountymd.gov

www.howardcountymd.gov
FAX 410-313-3051

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The Honorable Ben Barnes, Chair
Appropriations Committee
120 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT** of **House Bill 1559**: Children in Unlicensed Settings and Pediatric Hospital Overstay Patients- Placement

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Kaiser and Members of the Committee:

In Howard County, the safety and well-being of our children and youth are always front of mind. Ensuring that children are placed in appropriate care settings during situations requiring an out-of-home placement is critical to reduce trauma, promote healing and ensure long-term stability. Too often, youth find their way to the safety of a hospital bed when a community-based placement is needed. They may then linger at the hospital for days or weeks awaiting appropriate placement with a family or facility from the Department of Social Services. These youth “overstays” create a burden for our region’s hospitals, which are trying to both serve youth in desperate need of shelter, food and safety as well as provide life-saving care to the general public. I commend Speaker Joseline Pena-Melnyk for her leadership in sponsoring House Bill 1559, which aims to address this challenge.

Locally, we have made significant investments toward systemic changes to create better pathways for patients. With a $2 million investment in County funding, we were able to work with Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center (JHHCMC) to open a brand-new behavioral health unit. This effort increased bed capacity from five to 24 beds and reduced wait times by two hours for these patients. Additionally, we invested an overall $15 million for an emergency room expansion, adding a 29- bed observation unit. We know that these changes are just part of a solution to ensure that all youth and families receive the appropriate care in the appropriate settings.

Over the past seven years, Howard County also has invested nearly $6 million in our STRIVES (Strategies to Reach an Inclusive Vision and Equitable Solutions) initiative to improve educational and mental health outcomes. Additionally, we have invested more than $2 million in nearly 40 youth programs, reaching 13,000 young people to ensure that there are continued supports to increase positive interventions for all youth.

These initiatives, coupled with the systemic changes outlined by HB 1559 provide better care for children and families. Our systems must provide safe, specialized settings with trained staff will ensure that children are protected from further abuse, exploitation, and re-traumatization. HB1559 promotes needed system changes so that children can thrive in environments that are stable, therapeutic, and developmentally appropriate.

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HB 1559 moves Howard County and Maryland toward a more coordinated and child-centered approach to ensure that every child receives the right care and the right time, preventing crisis escalation and strengthening families and communities.

I again urge the Committee's **support for HB 1559**.

Respectfully,

Calvin Ball
Howard County Executive