

Testimony for SB421

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Committee.

My name is Nikia K. Vaughan, and I am the Executive Director of the Maryland Sickle Cell Disease Association. I am also the mother of two children living with chronic illnesses, including sickle cell disease. Thank you for the opportunity to share my strong support for SB421.

Last year, I had the privilege of spending time with the Invisible Warriors, a powerful group of students living with sickle cell disease at Morgan State University. Their stories were courageous, honest, and deeply concerning. One student, Mr. Morgan, shared that some professors do not allow students to make up work or excuse absences when they are hospitalized or experiencing a pain crisis. Another student described sitting in class in severe pain because they feared failing if they missed too many days. No student should have to choose between their health and their education.

As a mother, these stories stay with me. My daughter will enter high school next year, and she is an aspiring artist who served as the inaugural in-house artist at the Sickle Cell Summit as a guest of HHS Health Secretary Becerra. She dreams of attending MICA in Baltimore. As she becomes college-bound, I think about the type of community and academic environment she will need if she becomes ill. Students with chronic illnesses deserve support, compassion, and academic policies that recognize the realities of living with sickle cell disease.

SB421 strengthens that support by ensuring that students living with sickle cell disease are not penalized for managing a medical condition that is unpredictable and often severe. This bill helps protect their academic progress and their dignity. It also gives families like mine peace of mind knowing that our children can pursue their dreams without unnecessary barriers.

I offer this testimony not only as a parent, but as a professional who works every day to improve health and educational outcomes for individuals living with sickle cell disease. Our students deserve the same opportunities as anyone else, and SB421 moves us closer to a more equitable and compassionate Maryland.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I respectfully urge a favorable report for SB421.