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Maryland General Assembly

Annapolis, Maryland

Re: Support for SB0496 and HB 813 – Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Coverage for the Treatment of Obesity

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee:

Choose Healthy Life (CHL) respectfully submits this testimony in strong support of **Senate Bill 0496** and **House Bill 813**, legislation that would allow Maryland Medicaid to provide coverage for FDA-approved medications for the treatment of obesity.

Choose Healthy Life is a national initiative working through the Black church, the oldest and most trusted institution in the Black community, to improve health outcomes in hard-to-reach and historically underserved communities. In Maryland, our program churches provide free health services, screenings, navigation support, and chronic disease education to underserved Black communities. Through this work, we see firsthand how gaps in policy translate into real consequences for families.

We have seen the impact of limited access to obesity care up close. Congregants living with obesity struggle to manage their health despite doing everything asked of them: attending appointments, improving nutrition, and increasing physical activity. Yet they are denied access to medically appropriate treatment until their condition worsens into diabetes, heart disease, or stroke. By then, the harm has already compounded.

Maryland's current Medicaid policy excludes coverage for an entire class of FDA-approved anti-obesity medications. As a result, individuals must often wait until they are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes or survive a cardiovascular event before gaining access to medications that could have prevented those outcomes in the first place. **This approach effectively says: get sicker, then we will treat you.**

Obesity is a chronic, relapsing disease recognized by major medical associations. It is also a leading driver of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, kidney disease, and other life-threatening conditions that disproportionately impact Black communities. In many of the congregations we serve, obesity is not simply about individual behavior. It is shaped by structural inequities, food access, environmental barriers, stress, and limited access to consistent preventive care.

Denying Medicaid beneficiaries access to evidence-based obesity treatment reinforces those inequities.

SB0496 and **HB 813** would allow Maryland Medicaid to cover safe, effective, FDA-approved medications for obesity. These medications have undergone rigorous federal review and, when prescribed appropriately under medical supervision, can significantly reduce weight, improve metabolic health, and

lower the risk of severe complications.

For the communities we serve, this is not cosmetic care, and characterizing it that way reflects a misunderstanding of both the science and the lived realities of patients. It is lifesaving, medically necessary treatment.

Early intervention can prevent strokes, heart attacks, amputations, dialysis, and premature death. It can reduce long-term healthcare costs and preserve quality of life for Maryland families. Most importantly, it aligns Medicaid policy with modern medical understanding that obesity is a treatable chronic disease.

Medicaid beneficiaries should not be placed in a position where access to care depends on becoming sicker. Maryland has an opportunity to adopt a preventive, equitable approach that treats obesity before irreversible damage occurs.

Choose Healthy Life urges you to vote favorably on SB0496 and HB 813 and ensure that Maryland's most vulnerable residents have access to comprehensive, evidence-based obesity treatment.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to improving access to healthcare across Maryland.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. KL Williams

Rev. Kimberly L. Williams

President & CEO

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