

Florence Champagne
7300 Riverhill Road
Oxon Hill, MD 20745

Written Testimony in Support of SB 496

Thank you to Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, and all members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you to Senator Stephen Hershey for sponsoring bill SB 496.

My name is Dr. Florence Champagne, and I am the Founder and CEO of Open My Heart Foundation and a proud member of the Association of Black Cardiologists (ABC). ABC is a nonprofit organization composed of over 2,000 health professionals, community health advocates, corporate members, and institutional members, dedicated to promoting prevention of cardiovascular disease in communities of color and eliminate health disparities. For the past few years, we have also worked to end disparities in obesity care due to the high rates of obesity among communities of color and the strong correlation between obesity and cardiovascular disease. As such, we are asking you to support SB 496, as we believe that Medicaid coverage of obesity care, including anti-obesity medications, is essential to promoting health equity.

Obesity is a serious health equity crisis in both the United States and in Maryland. 31.3% of Marylanders suffer from obesity. And these rates are high for Black Marylanders (39.1%) compared to their white counterparts (28.1%)

Obesity is one of the most prevalent and severe risk factors for heart disease. Individuals with obesity and high blood pressure have a 12% increase in coronary heart disease and a 24% increased risk for stroke. Like obesity, Black Americans are also disproportionately impacted by heart disease. In 2022, Black Americans were 35% more likely to die from major heart or blood vessel diseases. Currently, we have the tools to tackle obesity head on and reduce instances of cardiovascular disease by up to 15%. However, the current system bars Medicaid from covering AOMs unless a patient is already suffering from cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, or sleep apnea. We are forcing patients to get sicker before they can get better.

Over the past several years, pharmacological innovations have completely revolutionized the way we treat and view obesity. We now understand that obesity is a complex chronic disease, and we have the tools to treat it. Under current law in Maryland, Medicaid does not cover obesity treatments. This system reflects an outdated understanding of obesity. It

forces the most vulnerable among us to continue to get sicker before they can access treatment. It inhibits doctors from properly caring for their patients. A quarter of Marylanders rely on Medicaid for health care. Denying them access to care only furthers health disparities, forces patients to suffer more, relies on less trusted options, and bears additional financial costs that they will take on due to increased chronic conditions.

We believe legislators have a significant role in addressing obesity and related health disparities. The citizens of this state who are largely impacted by these issues are entrusted in your hands and power to vote in a way that has their best interests at heart. You have the legislative power to make a decision that will immensely impact their quality of life and achieve and maintain the healthiest lives that they have yearned for. We urge you to pass SB 496 and ensure that all Marylanders have access to the tools and resources they need to maintain a healthy weight.

Thank you for your time, and I urge you all to support SB 496 and any other policies that aim to guarantee access to comprehensive obesity care. Thank you for your attention to this issue, and we look forward to addressing this critical public health issue together.