

Testimony in SUPPORT of SB 870 – MD Department of Health – Adolescent Psychiatric
Inpatient Beds – Capacity in Prince George’s County and Report
Sponsored by: Senator Alonzo Washington

To the Members of the Committee on Finance in the Maryland Senate –

My name is Danielle LeClair and I am testifying today in favor of SB 870, which would finally bring critically needed mental health services for kids to Prince George’s County.

I adopted my daughter Patience from foster care when she was 9 years old. Patience has a significant history of trauma from her birth and foster families and serious mental diagnoses including PTSD and depression. We live in University Park in Prince George’s County.

Unfortunately, Patience has needed to be hospitalized for mental health treatment a number of times. Even worse, due to a shortage of inpatient psychiatric hospital beds for treating kids and teens, Patience’s health has been actually made worse on multiple occasions.

Patience has “boarded” or stayed for a prolonged period of time at several Emergency Rooms – including one stay of 10 days, and once when an ER moved her to another hospital without telling me. None of those ERs had pediatric ER areas, so Patience was exposed to some really scary things, including adult men at the same ER area with Mental Health issues, people coming in with heart attacks and from car crashes, and more. This is terrifying for a child – especially one with a history of trauma and PTSD.

Due to a shortage of inpatient psychiatric hospital beds in Maryland, Patience has had to go to DC, Pennsylvania and even Utah for lifesaving mental health treatment. Some of this was covered by insurance and some was not.

Even when Patience was able to get admitted to a hospital in Maryland, she was often an hour or more away from home – in Baltimore City, in Calvert County, and in Frostburg (Allegany County). That meant that I had to travel extremely long distances to visit her. When you are a worried mom, the last thing you need is a 2-hour roundtrip drive to visit your child at a hospital.

While this bill would require the new inpatient hospital beds for psychiatric care for kids/teens in Prince George’s County, this bill will help ALL children facing mental health issues in our state who need inpatient care. This is because there is a serious shortage of inpatient psychiatric bed for kids/teens in our whole state. Opening two dozen beds in my county will mean that kids who live in the Baltimore area can hopefully get treated in Baltimore, kids in Southern Maryland can get treatment there, etc. Further, there are fewer than 10 hospital overstay beds (at Brooklane)

for kids in the entire state; Maryland closed Salem Trust in Frostburg about 4 years ago, leaving only a few beds at Brooklane for kids who need extended mental health hospitalizations.

I want to close by sharing one really scary story. Two years ago, when she was 16 years old, Patience was hospitalized 3 times in 2 months for mental health care. I begged every Department in Maryland for help (Developmental Disabilities Administration, Department of Behavioral Health, etc), I was finally told that DDA had a short-term “program” where kids like Patience with serious mental health issues and developmental disabilities could be placed in an apartment – in Baltimore City- an hour from our home – with just one aide outside their door. No treatment was offered – just minimal supervision. I agonized at the time what to do. Ultimately, I declined the offer and my incredible delegates and senator from District 22 and my county council member helped me to find resources and I was able to get Patience into a long-term mental health program. I am glad to say that her mental health has improved somewhat since then.

But, when I read the story of the death of Miss Kanaiyah Ward last Fall alone in a hotel room in Baltimore, I broke down in tears. Just like Patience, Kanaiyah was 16 years old. Just like Patience, Kanaiyah needed lifesaving mental health care. Just like Patience, Kanaiyah lived in Prince George’s County. Just like Patience, Kanaiyah’s mom was not given the opportunity to have her daughter be treated in a hospital, and instead was only offered lodging (in a hotel) an hour away with one aide as a last resort to help her daughter. The only difference is that Kanaiyah died alone in a hotel instead of getting lifesaving treatment at a hospital, and my child is alive today. I grieve with Kanaiyah’s mom and everyone who loved her. The same tragedy could absolutely have happened to my child.

Maryland should not be offering hotel rooms and apartments to children with serious mental health issues. These children need to be in a health care setting – hospital, hospital overstay, residential treatment.

SB 870 would ensure that children like my daughter would finally get the lifesaving mental health care that they need. **I beg you to pass this bill so that no more children in our state lose their lives due to a lack of access of mental health care.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of SB 870 today and I hope that it will pass the Committee and become law this year.