

**HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF**

**SB 490 - Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Step Therapy, Fail-First
Protocols, and Prior Authorization - Prescription Drugs to Treat Serious
Mental Illness**



**Senate Finance Committee
February 17, 2026**

Health Care for the Homeless supports SB 490, which would prohibit Medicaid from applying a prior authorization requirement for prescriptions to treat certain serious mental illnesses. The bill would also prohibit Medicaid's requirements of step therapy or fail-first protocols for specified serious mental illnesses. With access to serious mental health treatment already so challenging, removing such administrative barriers ensures that vital medication can get to our most vulnerable clients.

Health Care for the Homeless Director of Psychiatry, Meredith Johnston, MD, details the barriers her patients with serious mental illness have faced as a result of these arbitrary protocols:

Dear Chairperson and Esteemed Members of the Committee,

My name is Meredith Johnston, and I am a board-certified psychiatrist with 18 years of experience treating severe and persistent mental illness. I strongly support SB 490 which prohibits prior authorization, step therapy, and fail-first protocols for prescription drugs treating mental illnesses.

Mental health crises require urgent action. Delays caused by administrative barriers can worsen symptoms, leading to unnecessary suffering and more intensive, costly interventions later. Quick and appropriate intervention can help people stay out of the hospital and not get involved with police and criminal charges for being acutely ill in public.

Step therapy that requires "fail first" criteria can be particularly harmful for people with severe and persistent mental illness that require highly individualized and nuanced treatment based on an understanding of each patient's history, co-morbidities, and response to prior treatments. Delaying care with increased administrative burdens undermines clinical judgement.

Case Example

I recently had a patient with severe tardive dyskinesia. He met the criteria for Ingrezza to target his medication-induced movement disorder. The prior authorization was declined multiple times as the peer reviewer questioned his diagnosis of clear schizophrenia in the context of long-term sequelae of homelessness. The patient gave up waiting for an approval and apparently has abandoned treatment.

In conclusion, SB 490 represents a crucial step toward ensuring that individuals with mental illnesses receive the care they need without unnecessary delays or barriers. By supporting this bill, you are prioritizing the mental health and well-being of Maryland's residents and affirming the importance of evidence-based, patient-centered care.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I urge you to vote in favor of this critical legislation.

For the health and safety of our patients, Health Care for the Homeless urges a favorable report on SB 490.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 11,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.