



**Committee:** Government, Labor, and Elections and Health

**Bill Number:** House Bill 420 – Modernizing Civil Relief for Service Members Act

**Hearing Date:** February 17, 2026

**Position:** Support

---

The Maryland School Counselor Association (MSCA) respectfully submits this testimony in strong support of House Bill 420. MSCA represents professional school counselors across Maryland who provide essential academic, career, and social-emotional support to students in public schools statewide.

House Bill 420 is needed to address the growing disconnect between Maryland’s student mental health needs, workforce shortages, and licensure and renewal frameworks that—while well-intentioned—can create unnecessary delays, duplication, and financial burdens. The bill is particularly important because it addresses not only initial licensure portability, but also licensure renewal requirements that can unintentionally impede qualified school counselors from continuing to serve Maryland students during temporary or involuntary relocations.

### **Why House Bill 420 Is Needed**

School counselors are often the **first mental health professionals a student sees**, and they play a central role in identifying needs, responding to crises, and coordinating supports for students and families. When counselor positions remain vacant—or when qualified counselors are delayed or discouraged from practicing due to administrative or duplicative licensure and renewal requirements—students lose access to critical services.

Under current law, military-connected school counselors licensed and practicing in good standing in another state may face uncertainty or delay not only in initial authorization to practice, but also with respect to **Maryland-specific licensure renewal requirements that were not designed for temporary or involuntary relocations**. House Bill 420 addresses this problem by ensuring that licensure portability functions as intended across

professions, including education, and by providing limited relief from renewal requirements that would otherwise apply during a counselor's period of authorization under this military portability statute.

In doing so, House Bill 420 ensures that qualified school counselors can continue working without interruption while preserving Maryland's long-term certification standards.

### **Impact on School Counselors**

As a result of House Bill 420, school counselors who relocate to Maryland due to military orders may be authorized to practice under the licensure portability provisions established in § 10-14A-03 of the State Government Article. This allows qualified school counselors licensed and practicing in good standing in other states to begin working in Maryland schools without unnecessary delay while their Maryland credentials are under review.

School counselors are explicitly addressed in the Education Article rather than the general occupational licensing provisions. House Bill 420 amends Education Article § 6-704.1(a) to include the following language:

“THIS SUBSECTION DOES NOT APPLY TO AN INDIVIDUAL AUTHORIZED TO PROVIDE SCHOOL COUNSELING IN THE STATE UNDER § 10-14A-03 OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT ARTICLE.”

This targeted amendment clarifies that school counselors practicing under this military licensure portability law are not subject to Maryland-specific renewal training requirements during the period of authorization, ensuring consistency and preventing unintended barriers unique to the profession.

### **The Central Role of School Counselors in Student Mental Health**

School counselors are a critical component of the school-based behavioral health team and are **the only professionals charged with monitoring the needs of all students in a school**, not just those already identified for services.

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), school counselors:

- Recognize mental health warning signs;
- Provide short-term counseling and crisis intervention related to mental health or situational concerns such as grief or difficult transitions; and
- Coordinate care with other behavioral health professionals when longer-term or more intensive services are needed.

In addition to direct services, school counselors advocate for the mental health needs of all students by delivering instruction that promotes mental health awareness, providing appraisal and advisement addressing academic, career, and social/emotional

development, and implementing statewide initiatives such as **Start Talking Maryland** lessons.

### **Current Duplicative and Financially Burdensome Renewal Requirements**

School counselors are among the few educator licensure areas subject to additional, profession-specific renewal requirements. Effective July 1, 2016, Maryland required school counselors to complete specialized training related to recognizing and responding to indicators of mental illness and behavioral distress, including depression, trauma, violence, youth suicide, and substance abuse. This requirement was enacted through House Bill 947, commonly known as **Lauryn’s Law**.

Lauryn’s Law requires school counselors to complete **15 Continuing Education Units (15 clock hours)** or **one semester hour of academic coursework** every five years as part of the certificate renewal cycle. The Maryland State Department of Education has acknowledged that these competencies can already be earned through the **90 Professional Development Points (PDPs)** required for renewal, making the requirement duplicative for many counselors.

In addition, the option to complete one semester hour of academic coursework can be **financially burdensome**, as tuition and fees are borne by individual counselors. These costs present a real barrier in a profession already facing recruitment and retention challenges.

### **Regulatory Context and Consistency**

On January 28, 2025, the State Board of Education adopted amendments to COMAR 13A.12 that preserved the Lauryn’s Law requirement while allowing limited flexibility through the Senior Educator Waiver when requested by an employing district. This update reflects MSDE’s recognition that renewal requirements should be applied flexibly in narrowly defined circumstances.

House Bill 420 applies that same principle of **targeted, temporary flexibility** to military service members and their spouses—ensuring that counselors who are already licensed, trained, and practicing in good standing are not subject to unnecessary duplication or financial burden during a temporary or involuntary relocation.

### **Workforce Shortages and Student Equity**

The need for House Bill 420 must be understood in the broader context of Maryland’s ongoing student support workforce shortages and unresolved equity challenges.

On August 26, 2025, the Maryland State Board of Education (MSBE) voted to adopt the Maryland State Department of Education’s (MSDE) updated Strategic Plan. That plan set a goal of increasing the percentage of schools with at least **2.0 full-time equivalent (FTE) student support professionals**, including school counselors, school social workers,

school psychologists, student personnel workers, mental health professionals, career counselors, and behavioral interventionists.

While this approach may expand access to student services, it falls short of the **Blueprint for Maryland's Future's clear intent** to ensure adequate access to school counselors specifically. A more targeted student-to-school-counselor ratio metric—originally discussed at the June 25, 2024 joint meeting of MSBE and the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB)—was never resolved.

Although MSDE initially included a student-to-counselor ratio metric in its May 2025 draft Strategic Plan, that metric was ultimately removed and replaced with the broader 2.0 FTE student support professional measure. This change eliminated a key accountability safeguard at a time when Maryland remains far from the nationally recognized **250:1 student-to-school-counselor benchmark**.

Currently, the statewide average student-to-counselor ratio is approximately **307:1**, with some districts exceeding **1,000 students per counselor**. These disparities represent a significant equity crisis that disproportionately harms students in high-need schools and communities.

Despite ongoing advocacy from MSCA, on September 30, 2025, the Accountability and Implementation Board and the Maryland State Board of Education voted to adopt the 2.0 FTE student support professional metric as part of the Strategic Plan update. During that joint meeting, AIB Chair Ike Leggett explicitly acknowledged the inequities in student access to school counselors reflected in current ratios.

In this context, reducing unnecessary licensure and renewal barriers is not merely an administrative concern—it is a workforce and equity imperative. House Bill 420 addresses a specific, solvable barrier by ensuring that qualified military-connected school counselors can enter and remain in Maryland's education workforce without delay during temporary or involuntary relocations.

### **Conclusion**

House Bill 420 is a pragmatic, narrowly tailored response to a documented workforce, equity, and student mental health challenge. By addressing both licensure portability and renewal requirements for military-connected school counselors, the bill strengthens Maryland's education workforce while preserving appropriate professional standards.

For these reasons, MSCA respectfully urges a favorable report on House Bill 420.

If you have any questions, please contact Jocelyn Collins at [jcollins@policypartners.net](mailto:jcollins@policypartners.net).