



HOWARD COUNTY OFFICE OF COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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The Honorable Heather Bagnall, Chair
Health Committee
240 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT of House Bill 1563: Emergency Room Services and Post-Acute Care - Coverage and Facility Studies**

Dear Chair Bagnall, Vice Chair Cullison, and Members of the Committee:

I want to begin by recognizing Speaker Joseline Peña-Melnyk's leadership in spearheading this timely legislation. House Bill 1563 helps to protect individuals against retrospective denial of emergency services claims based solely on a determination that a condition did not ultimately meet the federal definition of an emergency medical condition, an important safeguard for all Maryland families. Residents experiencing acute symptoms such as chest pain or shortness of breath should not face financial uncertainty when making a reasonable decision to seek emergency care. Aligning coverage protections with prudent layperson expectations promotes fairness, predictability, and patient confidence in choosing what they believe to be the best care setting for themselves or loved ones.

Howard County is served by a single hospital, Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center, which makes system capacity and patient turnaround times particularly important. When emergency departments experience strain or when post-acute placement is delayed, there are limited redistribution options. For this reason, Howard County has made substantial investments to strengthen our local healthcare infrastructure and improve patient flow. In recent years, Howard County has:

- Committed \$15 million to support construction of a 29-bed Observation Unit designed to decrease emergency department wait times and improve patient throughput.
- Funded development of a Discharge Suite in partnership with the Maryland Hospital Association to accelerate inpatient discharges and free acute care beds more efficiently.
- Invested in expanding behavioral health capacity to address psychiatric boarding challenges and improve access for vulnerable residents, tripling the psychiatric bed capacity.
- Dedicated resources to upstream care navigation and prevention initiatives aimed at reducing unnecessary emergency department utilization before residents arrive at the hospital.
- Invested \$3 million for enhanced access to advanced trauma care through strengthened partnership with the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center, ensuring critically injured patients in Howard County have rapid access to the highest level of trauma expertise and coordinated care.



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- Invested annually in the Mobile Integrated Health program, expanding community-based care navigation, preventive outreach, and cross-sector engagement to reduce unnecessary 911 calls, improve emergency system performance, and address underlying health and social needs before crises arise.

The two studies required under HB1563 related to acute and post-acute care settings also have the potential to improve how Howard County and HCMC work together to improve patient outcomes. The bill's data reporting requirements and the directive for the Maryland Health Care Commission and Health Services Cost Review Commission to study hospital and post-acute bed capacity will provide valuable insight into structural challenges contributing to ED congestion. Understanding the distinction between licensed and staffed beds, as well as barriers to clinically appropriate transitions of care, is critical to developing effective solutions that improve patient flow and reduce unnecessary strain on emergency services. These mandated data outputs will allow counties like ours to more precisely analyze root causes of congestion and direct limited public resources toward the strategies that deliver the greatest measurable impact for our residents.

We believe this bill works in tandem with our values and our current efforts to help patients receive optimal healthcare. For these reasons, I again urge the Committee's **favorable report on HB1563**.

Respectfully,

Calvin Ball
Howard County Executive