

Testimony in Support of House Bill 468 – Digital Social Media Services and the Mental Health Care Fund for Children and Youth

Before the House Ways and Means Committee

Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 468. My name is Megan O'Brien, and I am the Advocacy Specialist at EveryMind, a nonprofit organization that has served Maryland communities for nearly 70 years by providing prevention, early intervention, and mental health services across the continuum of care. I thank Delegate Martinez for bringing this important piece of legislation back this year.

EveryMind has deep expertise in children's mental health. We provide school-based mental health services in over 40 schools in Maryland, delivering care that is accessible, timely, and responsive to the unique needs of children and families.

The demand for children's mental health services in Maryland has never been greater. According to the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, nearly 40% of high school students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless, and rates of suicidal ideation among youth have surged alarmingly in recent years. The pandemic has only exacerbated these challenges, exposing systemic gaps in access to care that disproportionately affect low-income families and communities of color.

EveryMind recommends an amendment to the bill that would direct any funds collected from the tax to the Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports, established by the Blueprint legislation to provide behavioral health services to students, rather than creating an entirely new fund and administrative structure to manage that fund.

Funding for the Consortium has been at risk since its establishment, despite the great results these investments in school mental health care have shown in the last several years. In FY25, Consortium-funded programs served more than 137,000 students in 86% of Maryland schools – with a nearly 90% satisfaction rate from students and their families. So far this school year, students have shown even higher rates of improvement than FY25 across all three levels of intervention - preventative, targeted, and intensive – highlighting the need for consistent services. Despite this, the BRFA has proposed cutting funding for the Consortium yet again, this time by \$20 million a year. Without a clear and sustainable funding plan, programs that serve our students will continue to be at risk of shutting down, losing trust within communities and causing more harm down the line for our students and their families.

A Therapeutic Mentor at one of our Consortium-funded schools started working with a student last year to support him with both his academic and housing needs. The relationship they've built over the last year and a half has grown stronger as time has gone on, with her supporting him on college applications, essays, and cover letters this year. Through their work together, his confidence, focus, and grades improved – and he was accepted into all four colleges he applied to via early action and he even has plans to apply to some reach schools this spring. Without the time taken to build trust, he may not have had the chance to discover all he's capable of.

At EveryMind, we know that when children and families can access mental health care early and consistently, outcomes improve dramatically. House Bill 468 could create an avenue that would bring consistency in funding to support this work, and so we urge a favorable report for this piece of legislation. Thank you for your leadership on this critical issue and for your commitment to Maryland's children and families.