

## **Testimony in Favor with Amendments House Bill 740 Public Schools School Based Mental Health Services Full Time Therapist**

Chair, Vice Chair, and distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is The Honorable Dr. Cashenna A. Cross. I appear before you today in support of House Bill 740 with thoughtful amendments to strengthen implementation and ensure long term sustainability for Maryland students and school systems.

Throughout my career in public service, military leadership, and community advocacy, I have witnessed firsthand that student success is inseparable from mental wellness. As a United States Air Force veteran and master instructor who trained thousands of mid grade officers, I learned that readiness is not only physical or academic. It is emotional, behavioral, and psychological. The same principle applies to our children.

Across our communities, educators are increasingly serving as first responders to anxiety, trauma, violence exposure, family instability, and social pressures that follow students into the classroom each day. Teachers cannot carry this responsibility alone. Professional therapeutic support inside the school day is no longer optional. It is essential.

House Bill 740 recognizes a simple truth. Early intervention prevents crisis. When licensed therapists are consistently present in schools, students receive support before challenges escalate into disciplinary actions, academic decline, or long term behavioral harm. This approach strengthens learning environments, improves attendance, and supports safer schools.

My work supporting youth programs, violence prevention initiatives, and anti trafficking advocacy has consistently shown that untreated trauma in childhood often becomes crisis in adulthood. Providing access to licensed mental health professionals where children already are removes stigma and barriers to care, particularly for families who may lack transportation, insurance access, or flexible schedules.

While I strongly support the intent of this legislation, several amendments would ensure equitable and practical implementation.

First, the State should provide dedicated and recurring funding support so that local school systems are not forced to divert existing instructional or municipal resources to meet the requirement.

Second, implementation timelines should account for workforce shortages by allowing phased hiring where qualified therapists are not immediately available, paired with recruitment incentives and partnerships with Maryland universities.

Third, the bill should encourage coordination with existing community based mental health providers and county health departments to avoid duplication and to maximize culturally competent care.

Fourth, reporting standards should measure outcomes such as reduced absenteeism, improved behavioral indicators, and student wellbeing rather than relying solely on staffing compliance.

These amendments do not weaken the bill. They ensure that the promise of mental health access becomes a durable reality rather than an unfunded mandate.

Maryland has long recognized that education policy is also public safety policy and economic policy. Students who are emotionally supported are more likely to graduate, contribute positively to society, and lead healthy productive lives.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report with amendments on House Bill 740.

Respectfully submitted,

The Honorable Dr. Cashenna A. Cross Councilwoman at Large, City of Glenarden United States Air Force Veteran Municipal Advocate 571 719 8784