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House Bill 187 – Public Institutions of Higher Education – Outbreak Response Plan

Testimony of Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (Favorable with Amendments)

Good afternoon, Chairwoman McIntosh, Vice Chair and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you House Bill 187, requiring each public institution of higher education in Maryland to prepare and submit to the Maryland Department of Health an Outbreak Response Plan.

The genesis of this bill is indeed a very sad one. In the fall of 2018 students in dormitories at the University of Maryland began to exhibit symptoms of respiratory illness. The students were living in dormitories affected by mold and many complained of symptoms of respiratory illness: scratchy throats, itchy eyes, and headaches. Remediation of the mold problem was not entirely effective. Visible mold could be wiped with disinfectants but it was soon discovered that there was mold in areas not immediately visible – under drawers, in closets, and other areas.

One student, Olivia Paregol, was diagnosed with a strain of adenovirus and her health began a drastic decline. More students were diagnosed with an adenovirus, yet the university failed to notify the student population of the specifics of the outbreak.

Eventually, students were rotated out of the affected floors so the mold could be treated in their absence, but Ms. Paregol's health continued to decline even after moving out to temporary lodging. Upon her return to her dorm, her illness worsened.

Other students exhibited severe symptoms, but none approached the severity of Ms. Paregol's. Ms. Paregol was taken to Howard County hospital where her condition continued to worsen, then she was transferred to Johns Hopkins Hospital where she unfortunately died.

We could have done better for Olivia Paregol. Potentially dangerous health outbreaks can happen any time and the University needed a detailed Outbreak Response Plan to include:

1. identifying the problem,
2. initiating corrective action, and
3. communicating to the university population about the nature of the illness and the symptoms that signal trouble.

As heartbreaking as this incident was, it could have been even more serious. A similar outbreak at a long-term care facility in New Jersey resulted in the death of 11 children and sickened dozens more.

Universities cannot control the weather which resulted in this mold outbreak. They cannot control the outbreak of respiratory illnesses in dormitories, classrooms, cafeterias and other places where many students gather. But they CAN be prepared to respond when such events occur, and they can engage with the university community to help educate all about the risks present and the precautions required to stay healthy. Following an Outbreak Response Plan will help to ensure that this is the case in the future.

It is vital that the General Assembly act on this bill so that we are better prepared for the next outbreak. I respectfully request a favorable report of House Bill 187.