

HOUSE HEALTH AND GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE
House Bill 1040
State Board of Physicians-Genetic Counselors-Licensing
March 6, 2020
Recommendation: Favorable report
Christina Cugle

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on House Bill 1040, which, if passed, will establish licensure of genetic counselors in Maryland.

My name is Christina Cugle and I serve on the Board of Bosom Buddies Charities. Bosom Buddies Charities is a Maryland non-profit with a mission to promote breast cancer awareness, encourage early detection, support treatment and celebrate healing. I am testifying on behalf of the Maryland constituents the organization serves, including myself.

I am a breast cancer survivor. At age 39, I was diagnosed with Stage 2 of an aggressive breast cancer. As part of the comprehensive care plan from the multidisciplinary team at Anne Arundel Medical Center, I was offered genetic counseling services. My genetic counselor assisted me in evaluating my risk of a genetic condition, facilitating genetic testing, and educating me regarding the condition and available management options.

She compassionately delivered the sobering news that I carried the BRCA-1 gene mutation that significantly increases a carrier's likelihood of developing breast and ovarian cancers and considerably increases a patient's risk of recurrence of cancer. She provided emotional support while I made life-altering decisions that would impact my ability to have additional children and significantly change my body. I choose to have my breast and ovaries removed to mitigate my risk and hopefully prolong my life.

In my visits with the surgeon and oncologist, I was inundated with information regarding my tumor characteristics, Stage of disease, recommended treatment plan (surgery and chemotherapy) to treat the immediate cancer. If I was simply offered the "option" to have genetic testing by my physician without the guidance provided by the genetic counselor, I may have decided not to have the "elective" genetic testing considering the barrage of other mandatory tests and procedures. This decision to treat only the immediate disease and not have the prophylactic procedures to reduce my risk of ovarian cancer or recurrence of breast cancer may have been the difference between life and death.

The information I received from my genetic counselor was a key discriminator in my standard of care and my ability to make empowered and informed decisions about my health. Genetic counselors have specialized graduate degrees, training and experience in medical genetics and counseling that uniquely qualify them to provide critical information, guidance and support to patients and their families.

For the protection of patients, there should be a legal standard for who can represent themselves as genetic counselors. Genetic counselors should have appropriate training, be certified, and have continuing education requirements to stay abreast of the dynamic and evolving field of genetics. Licensure is an important mechanism to assist health care providers and patients to identify qualified genetic counselors.

We strongly support this legislation and encourage you to endorse licensure of genetic counselors in Maryland.