

Samay Kindra, Young Democrats of Maryland Caucus of Color
Testimony for SB 161

Committee on Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs, Wednesday, January 20, 2021
Task Force to Study Access to Mental Health Care in Higher Education

POSITION: FAVORABLE

On behalf of the Young Democrats of Maryland Caucus of Color, we would like to thank Delegate Valentino-Smith for introducing this bill and Senator Eckardt for cross-filing it. We would also like to thank the Committee on Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs for reviewing our testimony for this bill.

The decision to pursue Higher Education allows students to identify and explore areas of academic interest, develop new personal and professional connections, and experience a heightened sense of independence, often for the first time. However, feelings of stress and anxiety often accompany the college experience as students consistently strive to balance their academic and personal lives. If left unchecked, these feelings can manifest into more serious mental health concerns.

For minority communities, the need for accessible mental health care on campuses is even greater. Not only are they dealing with the aforementioned stressors for the first time, but they may experience additional stressors that come with being on campuses where they are often underrepresented. Additionally, they may have to rely solely upon their school's mental health care system due to the stigma surrounding mental health that still persists in their respective communities. This has led to the current mental health accessibility issue having an exacerbated impact on students from minority communities.

During the time of Covid-19, the need for accessible mental health services is even greater. Students across the board are facing increased feelings of anxiousness, loneliness, and stress. While this is true for much of the population as a whole, these feelings are heightened for students. They had expected to be at the peak of their social lives, not confined to their desks. They also have great concern over what the job market will look like as they see their recently graduated peers struggle to find jobs after years of education. These circumstances have shown us just how important accessible mental health care is, and how we must be prepared to provide it even in a virtual world.

The increased student need for mental health care services in institutions of Higher Education is well documented. According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2019 Annual Report, the percentage of students seeking counseling with symptoms of depression or anxiety has escalated over the past ten years. Further, the number of intake appointments at the University of Maryland's Counseling Center has increased 15% during the 2018 and 2019 academic year and 26% from the previous three-year average according to the 2018-2019 Annual Counseling Center report. Despite the implementation of a novel triage-counseling approach, students still struggle to schedule with a counselor in a timely fashion.

This bill would give Higher Education officials the tools necessary to better address their structure for mental health care, therefore advancing Maryland Higher Education schools as environments where mental health is prioritized and students can thrive. On behalf of the Young Democrats of Maryland Caucus of Color, we urge you to support this bill and provide students with this task force necessary for the identification and removal of structural inefficiencies that prevent effective mental health care at institutions of higher education.