

Senate Bill 172 Maryland Health Equity Resource Act
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
January 27, 2021
Position: Support

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is the state's only volunteer, nonprofit citizen's organization that brings together consumers, families, professionals, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and mental illness. We appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 172.

SB 172 seeks to require the Secretary of Health to designate Health Equity Resource Communities, and to be guided by a Health Equity Resource Community Advisory Committee. This is building off the successful work of the Maryland Health Improvement and Disparities Reduction Act of 2012, establishing Health Enterprise Zones which have since been shown as a strong return on investment for the state.

This legislation would also establish a Health Equity Resource Community Reserve Fund, which would provide much needed funding to, "behavioral health programs that provide prevention, recovery support, and harm reduction services for individuals with substance use and mental health disorders," with the stated intent to, "facilitate reduction of health disparities, improve health outcomes, provide drug treatment and rehabilitation, and reduce health costs and hospital admissions and readmissions in specific areas of the state."

By taking an equity-centered approach to addressing regional healthcare, this bill can move us forward in the undoing of centuries of historical harms inflicted upon communities across our state. The impacts of racial discrimination, redlining and segregation, of historical and contemporary traumas all contribute to the fatally discordant health outcomes which play out in our healthcare system here in Maryland. The impacts of racism on mental and behavioral health has been likened to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)¹, and has been shown to have lasting impacts on individuals well into older adulthood. This presents itself in over-diagnosing and mis-diagnosing of mental illnesses,² of increased likelihood that Black youth end up in detention

¹ Lanier, P. "Racism is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)." 2020, The Jordan Institute for Families.

<https://jordaninstituteforfamilies.org/2020/racism-is-an-adverse-childhood-experience-ace/>

² Perzichilli, T. "The historical roots of racial disparities in the mental health system." 2020, Counseling Today.

<https://ct.counseling.org/2020/05/the-historical-roots-of-racial-disparities-in-the-mental-health-system/>

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instead of treatment,³ and in Black adults being 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress than white adults.⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic is further exacerbating these issues. Existing health inequities have set the stage for the pandemic to impact Black communities at rates of 2 to 5 times those of their white counterparts. The impacts of job loss, housing insecurity and homelessness, and community loss of life due to Covid-19 may all contribute to increased risk of depression, anxiety, substance use and misuse, and suicidality.⁵ We are yet to know the full impact of this pandemic, but SB 172 presents an opportunity to act with strategic intention to begin addressing these life threatening inequities.

The Mental Health Association of Maryland supports the goals and intents of this bill and urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 172.

³ American Psychiatric Association. "Mental Health Disparities: Diverse Populations." 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/mental-health-facts>

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health. "Mental and Behavioral Health - African Americans." 2019. <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4>

⁵ Gibbs, T., Pauselli, L., Rosenfield, P., Solan, M., Vieux, U. "Mental Health Disparities Among Black Americans During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Psychiatric Times, October, 2020. <https://www.psychiatristimes.com/view/mental-health-disparities-among-black-americans-during-covid-19-pandemic>