

DATE: March 20, 2021

TO: Chairman Paul G. Pinsky  
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee  
Maryland Senate

FROM: Ana Nunez on behalf of:

- Mt. Hebron High School's PTSA, including but not limited to the Executive Committee and Mental Health Committee
- Sara Tagget, Teacher at Mt. Hebron High School
  - Youth Mental Health Advocacy Team:
  - Student Members: Katherine Albert, Clare Mansour, Colleen Poole
  - Parent Members: Michelle Albert and John Albert
  - PTSA Officers: Caroline Bodziak, PTSA President, and Erinn Camp Mansour, PTSA First Vice President

SUBJECT: **SUPPORT** - HB0461 - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

I am writing this letter to express strong support for HB0461 on behalf of myself, my family, our PTSA (concerned parents, teachers and students,) and many others in my community. We ask that you issue a favorable report for this legislation, which ensures that students can get an excused absence to address their mental health needs, with permission from a parent or guardian, and without requiring a note from a physician.

I am a 47-year-old mom, to two teenage daughters, as well as two step-daughters. I've worked full-time for the federal government for over 25 years. I have lived in Maryland all my life. As someone who has experienced trauma, resulting in mental health issues all my life, I am keenly aware of how important mental health is; just as important as physical health. Yet, it was not until I experienced my daughter's mental health issues that I was willing to begin the necessary research, partnering, community involvement and advocacy for this critical topic.

My oldest step-daughter and my youngest daughter both are on medication for depression and anxiety. They both had very difficult times navigating high school, while trying to deal with the height of their mental health concerns at the time.

While there are so many facets and joint solutions to mental health concerns, I know, without a doubt, that had my daughter been able to invoke a mental health day here and there, she would have found some much-needed relief during some of the most exhausting, overwhelming, and downright scary stretches of days of her life. Even with therapy, including dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) classes and group sessions, she still would have trouble as the pressure consistently piled on. A break for a day to re-group would have been extremely beneficial to her and may have prevented some truly self-destructive behaviors.

I have spent the past two years working with the Mt. Hebron High School PTSA and administration, within the Howard County Mental Health Community Action Council, with the Horizon Foundation in Howard County to foster the education, awareness and support needed for our high school students. Our PTSA has received multiple grants to help us with our critical work in mental health, and now we need your support, too. So, I am extending my work to advocacy on a larger scale now. I ask whole-heartedly, for your support for HB0461, as one more step in helping our teenagers learn how to prioritize their mental health and well-being.