



April 6, 2021

**Senate Education and Environmental Affairs Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

HB 915 Workgroup on Black, Latino, and Other Underrepresented Mental Health Professionals

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. **Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 77,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.**

Behavioral Health System Baltimore is pleased to support as amended HB 915- Workgroup on Black, Latino, Asian American Pacific Islander and Other Underrepresented Behavioral Health Professionals. This bill establishes the Workgroup on Black, Latino, and Other Underrepresented Behavioral Health Professionals that will identify and study the shortage of mental health professionals in the State who are Black, Latino or otherwise underrepresented in the behavioral health profession and assess and make recommendations on incentives or other methods address the shortage.

The Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health reports that Black adults in the U.S are more likely than white adults to report persistent symptoms of emotional distress, such as sadness and hopelessness. However, they are least likely to receive behavioral health care. The same applies to many communities of color when compared to white communities. BHSB supports HB 915 as we recognize the critical need to eliminate the disparities and improve access to mental health care for Black, Latino, and other underrepresented communities.

Studies show there are several barriers to quality care for communities of color. They include lack of diversity among behavioral health care providers, language barriers and lack of culturally competent providers. In addition, lack of cultural understanding by health care providers may contribute to underdiagnosis and/or misdiagnosis of mental illness in people from racially/ethnically diverse populations. Factors that contribute to these kinds of misdiagnoses include language differences between patient and provider, stigma of mental illness among minority groups, and cultural presentation of symptoms.¹

The lack of diverse mental health professionals make it difficult for communities of color to get adequate care. HB 915 is a step towards finding solutions to increase access to appropriate behavioral health support and care for diverse communities. The workgroup includes a diverse group of stakeholders, and behavioral health professionals. It also important to recognize the importance of Local Behavioral Health Authorities to these discussions because they manage the system of care for mental health and substance use disorder in their respective county. They can provide insight into the public

¹ American Psychiatric Association. “Mental Health Disparities: Diverse Populations” Fact Sheet. [African American Patients \(psychiatry.org\)](https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/african-american-patients)

system and the barriers that may exist for community behavioral health providers as it relates to the recruitment and retention of diverse behavioral health staff.

As such, BHSB urges the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee support HB 915 as amended.