



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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Testimony in SUPPORT of HB 132 –Mental Health Access Initiative

Youth today are no strangers to dealing with a myriad of stressors that they may not want to or be able to discuss with their parents or guardians. An adolescent not wanting to burden their parents may choose to stay silent about their steadily worsening depression, cutting them off from potential avenues of help and treatment. Current law, however, states that they must be sixteen to consent to mental health diagnosis, consultation, and treatment without parental notification.

Adolescents confront daily stressors on a near-constant basis. Even before the COVID 19 global pandemic the mental health landscape has greatly shifted for young people due to changes in technology. This can exacerbate and worsen underlying mental health issues they may have. There has to be a mechanism for young people to seek help from trained professionals before they reach a point of crisis.

According to the CDC, approximately one in five children in the US today has a diagnosable mental health condition. Overcoming the stigma we as a society put on those seeking mental health help is a large enough hurdle for youth in need to face. The fear that their parents will be told and become involved before the adolescent is ready may prevent them from seeking care.

The home environment of all youth in crisis is not the same. Many minors grow up in households whose parents stigmatize mental health problems, or may themselves be in crisis. A LGBTQ youth may not seek help if they are concerned of retribution from family members if they are brought into the process by a counselor. We cannot afford to deter a single youth in crisis when it is possible their life may be on the line.

HB 132 eliminates this barrier by stating that, if parental notification will deter the minor from seeking care, a provider does not have to notify the minor's parents. A provider is not mandated under this bill to give care for any reason. This bill respects the expertise of these highly trained providers by letting them determine if parental notification is the minor's best interest. Providers will also only proceed with treating the minor child if they deem that the minor is mature and capable of consenting to such service. Consultation of this type **does not extend to the prescribing of medication to the minor.**

This bill also does not prevent clinicians from involving the parents or legal guardians if after assessing the minor that they deem it is beneficial to the interest of the minor child. Involving the family in the treatment process is almost always essential to supporting the minor's mental health goals. Providers under most circumstances will seek consent from the guardian before beginning

treatment. It is only if they believe parental notification will deter the minor from seeking care that they can choose to not notify the minor's parents.

We frequently talk about disparities in healthcare but this bill addresses a disparity in the licensure of healthcare providers which treats two branches under the behavioral health umbrella completely differently. This body, recognizing the urgency of the opioid crisis does not define an age of consent for services, leaving the determination to the best practices of the licensed, trained provider, but defines for mental health services the age of 16. We are one of only four states in the nation with this disparity, and as these conditions are often co-occurring, and the provider community is not only working in both arenas but is already limited, this disparity in the licensure creates confusion and presents a barrier to getting our adolescent population the assistance they require.

Maryland is not alone in seeking to give more autonomy to minors in seeking mental health treatment in certain situations. Six other states allow minors twelve years or older to give consent to inpatient mental health treatment and seventeen other states set no floor age for consent to these services. For a full list please see the article located in Appendix 1.

When you are in crisis even the smallest obstacle can deter you from seeking help. This bill helps to eliminate one such barrier minors face when trying to get mental health treatment and support. Youth are some of the most vulnerable groups in our population and we have to make sure that they can get the mental health help they need.

Thank you and I ask for a favorable report on HB 132