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Prince George's County

Appropriations Committee

Chair, Democratic Caucus



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony of Delegate Jazz M. Lewis  
Regarding HB 463 Health Equity Resource Act  
On February 2, 2021

To Chairman Pendergrass, Vice-Chair Pena-Melnyk, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

I write in support of HB 463

Nationwide protest against racial injustice has highlighted systemic changes needed throughout society, including access to health care. Data in our state shows that the COVID-19 crisis has hit racial and ethnic minorities uniquely hard.

In Maryland, we have made progress over the last several years, but higher mortality rates persist for racial minorities and rural residents. Even within regions, large disparities exist. In my home county of Prince George's, there is a 16-year life expectancy gap between Suitland and Greenbelt.

This initiative, known as Health Equity Resource Communities (HERC), offers a targeted way to make sure support is reaching the areas that need it the most. Eligible communities will compete to be part of the HERC initiative by proposing ways to address the health needs of their underserved residents. Those selected will receive new grants and tax incentives to expand care. And health care providers working in those areas could become eligible to have their educational loans repaid – creating a valuable incentive for providers to practice in these areas.

Over time, this initiative will pump major new funds into these previously underinvested communities, with high-functioning healthcare providers making sure all resources are spent effectively.

Our goal is to wipe out the persistent health care disparities across the state, which harm people of color, people living in low-income neighborhoods, and people in rural areas.

This legislation builds on Rep. Anthony Brown's successful 2013 pilot to invest in communities, bring much-needed physicians and other professionals to medically underserved areas across the state, create targeted and unique outreaches distinct for those areas, and improve health for all.

Marylanders are focused on making our state more equitable, and a basic principle is that everyone should have access to high-quality, affordable health care, no matter where they live. Our bill is a smart way to funnel new resources to improve access to care in areas that have for too long suffered without it.

I urge a favorable report of HB 463.