



Maryland
Hospital Association

House Bill 836 - COVID-19 Testing, Contact Tracing, and Vaccination Act of 2021

Position: *Support*

February 23, 2021

House Health & Government Operations Committee

MHA Position

On behalf of the Maryland Hospital Association's (MHA) 60 member hospitals and health systems, we appreciate the opportunity to comment in support of House Bill 836.

Next week will mark one year since hospitals in Maryland began to see their first COVID-19 patients. In that time, they've cared for more than 34,000 of our family members, friends, and neighbors, who sadly have been affected by this virus. One year later, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a heavy toll on Maryland's health care infrastructure.

The challenges posed by COVID-19 will continue to evolve and will require the state to continually assess and adjust plans as they develop data-informed responses that suit their own unique circumstances, challenges, and the needs of communities. The requirements and additional resources provided under HB 836 will serve as the foundation for Maryland's ongoing pandemic response.

Testing: Widespread testing is necessary to treat and control infection. It is also essential for early detection of any increases in COVID-19 cases. Hospitals partnered and mobilized to efficiently test more than 1.2 million community members, patients, and staff for COVID in just the first six months of the pandemic. That number grows daily as hospitals continue to offer COVID tests to their communities, often through convenient drive-through and walk-up and other sites that ensure wider access across communities.

However, early in the pandemic testing capacity was inadequate. Barriers to testing included shortages of critical supplies, including reagents, swabs, lancets, and machines; maldistribution of supplies, owing to an uncoordinated supply chain; and significant staffing shortages. HB 836 would require the state to look ahead and resolve these deficiencies. We agree the state plan should ensure coordination of various testing efforts in the state across public and private partners to determine capacity, match to need, and deploy to areas of greatest need.

HB 836 is critical to support Maryland's sustained public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The state committed to broad, asymptomatic testing and recruited hospitals to assist with mass vaccination sites and community outreach. Late last year, the Maryland Department of Health issued a directive requiring health care practitioners to order tests for any individuals who believes they are necessary. Currently, federal law does not require insurer coverage of asymptomatic testing, which has been encouraged by public health officials as a crucial step to

identify COVID-19 spread within our communities. Hospitals and medical professionals indicate a patchwork of testing coverage and reimbursement policies across the major commercial payers in Maryland. While some payers indicate potential coverage for asymptomatic testing, others require prior authorizations or provider orders.

Providers have already started seeing denials for COVID-19 diagnostic claims from multiple payers for a variety of reasons, many of which are specific to the payer in question. These denials create significant administrative and financial burdens for caregivers, who at the same time are working to execute on the robust testing and vaccination strategy. HB 836 provides statutory requirements for uniform coverage of and reimbursement for asymptomatic testing to further the goals of the state and aid in the road to recovery from this catastrophic health emergency.

Contact Tracing: Maryland must continue to closely monitor signs of COVID-19 spread. Failing to do so, or without adequate testing and tracing in place, will mean we only notice problems when individuals begin to crowd emergency departments and outbreaks among the most at risk are reported. By that point, it may be too late to avoid larger scale community spread, which would bring another wave of critically ill patients that could overwhelm an already strained health care system.

Vaccines: When vaccines were made available in late 2020, hospitals stepped up to support one of the most ambitious vaccination efforts in our country's history. To date, Maryland hospitals have administered some 405,000 shots, more than any other category of vaccine provider. They invested in costly infrastructure such as ultracold freezers, dedicated venues, mobile clinics, information technology, and staffing. Hospitals and their outpatient affiliates are spread across every region in the state and can ensure geographic fairness and the ability to reach members of marginalized groups—persons of color, non-English speakers, the disabled, the elderly, the chronically ill, and others. Local health departments are also well-positioned and committed to ensuring equitable and efficient vaccine delivery. It is essential that the state's vaccination plan acknowledges the vital and trusted role hospitals and local health departments play in the state's vaccination efforts.

Public Health Infrastructure: State and local health agencies have significant experience in employing case-based strategies to lessen the spread of infectious disease. Scaling these efforts to the unprecedented levels needed to respond to a public health emergency require an expanded, well-trained workforce that builds on existing state disease investigation capacity; adequate systems to monitor and support infected individuals and contacts; consultation and technical assistance; and social resources for cases and contacts to ensure compliance with public health guidance.

The pandemic put incredible, unprecedented strains on our health care workforce. Staffing was far and away the top challenge identified by Maryland hospitals in their COVID response. In March 2020 alone, over \$4.6 million was paid for additional staffing by just 18 hospitals. Staffing expenses for community vaccination efforts are estimated to be in the hundreds of millions, with the majority of that cost attributed to staffing. Maryland hospitals welcome any

opportunity to strengthen our state's health care workforce, including through the public health job corps created by HB 836.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the strength of our state's public health system. The support offered in this legislation to shore up our state's systems for COVID testing, contact tracing, and vaccinations will help to speed our recovery and see our way through this unprecedented public health emergency.

For these reasons, we urge a *favorable* report.

For more information, please contact:

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