



March 23, 2021

**House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

*SB 520- Behavioral Health Services and Voluntary Placement Agreements- Children and Young Adults-
Report Modifications*

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 SB 520- Behavioral Health Services and Voluntary Placement Agreements- Children and Young Adults- Report Modifications. This bill would expand the Behavioral Health Administration’s (BHA) annual report on behavioral health services for children and young adults. It would require that the report include expanded information about substance use disorder treatment, utilization of telehealth services for behavioral health, and disaggregated data on race and ethnicity.

SB 520 builds upon previous legislation passed in 2018. Previous legislation required Behavioral Health Administration and the Social Service Administration report annually on the number of Voluntary Placement Agreements (VPA) requested, approved and the reasons for denial. The recent report was released in December 2020 while it provides a lot of helpful data the current report does not include vital information on the availability of telehealth services or substance use disorder services. The data provided in the report also does not provide a demographic breakdown to allow for an analysis of racial/ethnic disparities in service availability, nor does it help get to the root issues that are causing these fragmentations in service delivery.

BHSB supports SB 520 because this data will allow us to target services to address the needs of children and families particularly in Baltimore City. We often hear anecdotally the need for increased behavioral health services for children and youth in Baltimore City particularly for substance use disorder. Expanding the information in BHA report will provide a full accurate picture of the gaps in those services.

Requiring the data to be disaggregated by race and ethnicity, will allow us to target efforts to address the health inequities fueled by systemic and structural racism. The impacts of racism on behavioral health has been shown to have lasting impacts on individuals well into older adulthood. This presents itself in over-diagnosing and misdiagnosing of mental illnesses,¹ of increased likelihood that Black youth

¹ Perzichilli, T. “The historical roots of racial disparities in the mental health system.” 2020, Counseling Today. <https://ct.counseling.org/2020/05/the-historical-roots-of-racial-disparities-in-the-mental-health-system/>

end up in detention instead of treatment,² and in Black adults being 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress than white adults.³

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased access to telehealth services for behavioral health. SB 520 would require reporting on access to telehealth for behavioral health services. The service expansion has become a vital part of Maryland's continuum of care, but we still lack robust data on how this is being used to support children and youth with behavioral health needs. This added reporting requirement would help identify any inequities in service delivery, and help Maryland remain adaptable to meeting the mental and behavioral health needs of our communities.

SB 520 will provide us with more of the critical data needed to help improve the behavioral health system of care for children and youth in Baltimore City. **As such, BHSB urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to support SB 520.**

² American Psychiatric Association. "Mental Health Disparities: Diverse Populations." 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/mental-health-facts>

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health. "Mental and Behavioral Health - African Americans." 2019. <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4>