

**Senate Bill 52 Public Health - Maryland Commission on Health Equity  
(The Shirley Nathan-Pulliam Health Equity Act of 2021)**

Senate Finance Committee

February 2, 2021

**Position: Support**

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is the state's only volunteer, nonprofit citizen's organization that brings together consumers, families, professionals, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and mental illness. We appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 52.

SB 52 seeks to establish the Maryland Commission on Health Equity, and requires the state designated health information exchange to participate in an advisory committee of this Commission which would maintain and report on data sets which highlight the health inequities fueled by systemic and structural racism.

There is an overwhelming body of research arguing that structural racism – not race itself – creates widening generational health disparities for Black and Brown people. The impacts of discrimination, redlining and segregation, of historical and contemporary traumas all contribute to the fatally discordant health outcomes which play out in our healthcare system here in Maryland. The impacts of racism on mental and behavioral health has been likened to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)<sup>1</sup>, and has been shown to have lasting impacts on individuals well into older adulthood. This presents itself in over-diagnosing and mis-diagnosing of mental illnesses,<sup>2</sup> of increased likelihood that Black youth end up in detention instead of treatment,<sup>3</sup> and in Black adults being 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress than white adults.<sup>4</sup>

Creating the Maryland Commission on Health Equity, and incorporating a Health Equity Framework to allow the Commission to explore and make recommendations about the impacts of structural racism on the health and wellness of Marylanders, would be a bold step forward in addressing centuries of unjust health inequities. The Mental Health Association of Maryland strongly supports Senate Bill 52 and urges a favorable report on this bill.

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<sup>1</sup> Lanier, P. "Racism is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)." 2020, The Jordan Institute for Families.

<https://jordaninstituteforfamilies.org/2020/racism-is-an-adverse-childhood-experience-ace/>

<sup>2</sup> 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/>

<sup>3</sup> American Psychiatric Association. "Mental Health Disparities: Diverse Populations." 2017,

<https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/mental-health-facts>

<sup>4</sup> 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>

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