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**ORAL TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 132:
Health- Mental and Emotional Disorders- Consent (Mental Health Access Initiative)
Health and Government Operations Committee - February 16, 2021**

Thank you Madam Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, and committee members for all of the hard work you've done and are doing to improve the availability of healthcare services for Marylanders of all ages. My name is Rowan Willis-Powell, and I am here today representing On Our Own of Maryland. We are the oldest and largest entirely peer-operated Behavioral Health advocacy organization in the nation. We coordinate a network of 23 affiliated community-based peer Wellness & Recovery Centers, and we run a statewide Transitional Age Youth (**TAY**) Outreach Project, which empowers young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who have experience with the behavioral health system. We advocate for young adults to be equal partners in the process of systems change on local, state, and national levels.

On Our Own of Maryland is in strong support of House Bill 132. By lowering the age of consent to treatment to 12, this bill helps eliminate a barrier to care when youth take those first nerve-wracking steps of asking for help. In leading our TAY Project, I cannot count how many times I've heard young adults share experiences of feeling unsafe or contemplating suicide, but who are unsure about telling their parents or are in an unsupportive home. By changing the age of consent to treatment from 16 to 12, this bill allows youth to speak more spontaneously and more fully with guidance counselors and other clinical professionals. Currently, these critical conversations get cut short abruptly, in the most vulnerable moments, because the clinician needs to receive parental consent to continue giving support.

Allowing broad access to behavioral healthcare options to youth who are in desperate need is especially important as we continue to deal with the COVID- 19 Pandemic. A recent study done by the Center for Promise¹ has shown that this year of isolation and collective trauma has had devastating impact on youth across the country. Of the youth surveyed, 1 in 4 reported they had experienced an increase in losing sleep because of worry, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling constantly under strain, or experiencing a loss of confidence in themselves. This is on top of an already staggering statistic from the 2018 Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey², wherein 16.2% of highschoolers said that they have made a plan about how they would attempt suicide in the past 12 months. That number is more than double for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual youth at 36.1%.

As someone who was once a young adult in crisis, who needed someone to talk to, I was incredibly lucky to have a mother who was a social worker and was very supportive and knowledgeable. For many young adults this is not the case, and school- and community-based clinicians are the most accessible, accepting, and well-equipped resources available. It is vitally important that we ensure youth are able to seek help and treatment as soon as they are ready, and that we limit the barriers for doing so.

On Our Own of Maryland strongly urges you to support House Bill 132.

¹ The State of Young People during COVID-19. 2020. Prepared by The Center for Promise. Retrieved from <https://www.americaspromise.org/resource/state-young-people-during-covid-19>

² Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey. 2018. Retrieved from <https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/ccdpc/Reports/Pages/YRBS2018.aspx>