



## **Statement of Maryland Rural Health Association**

To the Health and Government Operations Committee

February 16, 2021

House Bill 132 Health – Mental and Emotional Disorders – Consent (Mental Health Access Initiative)

### **POSITION: SUPPORT**

Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, Delegate Bagnall, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee, the Maryland Rural Health Association (MRHA) is in **SUPPORT** of House Bill 132 Health – Mental and Emotional Disorders – Consent (Mental Health Access Initiative).

MRHA is in support of this legislation which lowers the minimum age, from 16 years to 12 years, at which a minor has the same capacity as an adult to consent to consultation, diagnosis, and certain treatment of a mental or emotional disorder by a health care provider or clinic.

All Marylanders, especially those in rural Maryland with limited access to behavioral health specialists, should be able to access quality behavioral health services. This lowered age of consent is already put into practice in youth accessing substance misuse disorder services and reproductive health services. During the COVID-19 pandemic when youth suicide rates are increasing, it is imperative that they are able to access behavioral health services, as they can do in other areas of health care.

MRHA's mission is to educate and advocate for the optimal health and wellness of rural communities and their residents. Membership is comprised of health departments, hospitals, community health centers, health professionals, and community members in rural Maryland.

Rural Maryland represents almost 80 percent of Maryland's land area and 25% of its population. Of Maryland's 24 counties, 18 are considered rural by the state, and with a population of over 1.6 million they differ greatly from the urban areas in the state.

And while Maryland is one of the richest states, there is great disparity in how wealth is distributed. The greatest portion of wealth resides around the Baltimore/Washington Region; while further away from the I-95 corridor, differences in the social and economic environment are very apparent.

MHRA believes this legislation is important to support our rural communities and we thank you for your consideration.

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