



February 8, 2023

**Senate Budget & Tax Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

SB 283 – Mental Health - Workforce Development - Fund Established

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 78,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports SB 283 – Mental Health - Workforce Development - Fund Established. Maryland is experiencing a behavioral health workforce shortage that demands state attention. This bill will strategically invest to address both current workforce demands and future needs.

Maryland has faced a behavioral health workforce shortage for many years and the pandemic only made this worse. Maryland has 63 federally designated mental health professional shortage areas, including 15 entire counties.¹ Most behavioral health providers have numerous open position that are going unfilled and this is harming access to care for Marylanders around the state. One particular area of difficulty that BHSB has seen is in hiring clinicians and peers for new mobile response teams that can serve as alternatives to the emergency room and law enforcement for those experiencing a mental health crisis. Providers in the Baltimore region have largely been unable to hire for these teams due to the demand for workers.

Another workforce shortage that can be addressed through this bill is the underrepresentation of people of color in mental health professions. About half of those served in the Maryland public behavioral health system are people of color but only 15% of mental health professionals in the U.S. are people of color.^{2, 3} This lack of diversity contributes to substandard care and must addressed through intentional workforce strategies and investments.

There are many positive ideas and strategies for growing and diversifying the behavioral health workforce – stipends and scholarships, enhanced training programs, loan repayment, paid internships, and others. The bill will determine the best short and long-term needs strategies for educating, training, recruiting, and retaining behavioral health professionals and paraprofessionals and direct investments towards those strategies. Funding is left discretionary initially to allow for a workforce needs assessment to ensure sound investments. **We urge the Senate Budget & Tax Committee to support SB 283 and begin to address the state’s behavioral health workforce needs.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142

Endnotes:

¹ Rural Health Information Hub available at: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/charts/7?state=MD>

² Maryland 2018 Mental Health National Outcome Measures available at <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/Maryland-2018.pdf>

³ Demographics of the U.S. Psychology Workforce available at: <https://www.apa.org/workforce/data-tools/demographics>