



March 6, 2024

House Health and Government Operations Committee

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT

HB 1040 - Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Limited Behavioral Health Services

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 100,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports HB 1040 - Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Limited Behavioral Health Services. This measure will eliminate the need to diagnose a young person prematurely to receive Medicaid reimbursement for basic mental health services and increase access to care.

Current policy requires a mental health diagnosis to receive reimbursement for mental health services. This can be a challenge when serving young people, however, due to the difficulty of providing an accurate diagnosis. It is normal for young people to experience a wide range of emotions and cognitive changes as part of their natural development. Providers may struggle to differentiate symptoms of a persistent mental health disorder from the normal experiences of growing up.

It can be helpful to spend more time getting to know a child and their behaviors prior to giving a diagnosis, but this is not possible under current policies. The provider instead must make a diagnosis at the first visit, and this undoubtedly leads to premature and inaccurate diagnoses. These behavioral health diagnosis will then stay with that child indefinitely.

Indeed, many young people who do not have an enduring behavioral health disorder could benefit from some limited behavioral health services. Children in Baltimore have experienced many adverse childhood experiences that require some education and coping skills to manage.¹ These young people could benefit from limited counseling services even if they do not have a diagnosable behavioral health disorder.

Our system should use mental health diagnoses to provide effective treatment, not as a barrier to receiving care in the first place. **BHSB urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to support HB 1040.**

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

References:

¹ Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2021-2022.” Available at <https://health.maryland.gov/phpa/ccdpc/Reports/Pages/State-Level-Data,-2021-2022.aspx>.