



Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee

February 15, 2023

Written Testimony in Support of HB0488 With an Amendment

Delegate Vanessa E. Atterbeary
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Ms. Chairwoman and Respected Members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

The Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee (MHAC) and the Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Advisory Council (AODAAC) are pleased to support HB0488, which would expand the eligibility under the Janet Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program (LARP) to include mental health professionals who work in public schools. Currently, the eligible employment fields under LARP include nurses, teachers, and clinical counselors. This legislation would expand eligibility to mental health professionals including school psychologists, resource psychologists, psychologist coordinators, social workers, social worker supervisors, and mental health coordinators. We urge you to also include substance use treatment providers as eligible.

The recent years have seen soaring rates of school disconnection, trauma, anxiety, depression, and suicide among our children and youth and increases in school-based incidents of violence and aggression, referrals to crisis centers and inpatient treatment, and accidental overdoses. The U.S. Surgeon General has declared a national crisis in youth mental health recognizing the mental health emergency being documented among children and adolescents. Among numerous recommendations, he calls for expanding the school-based mental health workforce.

School districts have sought to expand access to comprehensive school mental and behavioral health services, but these efforts are hindered, even halted, due to the workforce shortages of qualified mental health professionals. Across the state, districts are left with unfilled positions, limiting mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention services. For many students, especially those in under resourced and rural areas, schools are the only available source of mental and behavioral health care. Unfortunately, the workforce shortages of school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and other mental health professionals leave them with minimal access to critical prevention services and interventions.

To solve this problem, we must address the severe shortages of mental health professionals, particularly those qualified to work in schools (school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers). A proactive approach includes legislation such as HB0488 to increase opportunities for loan forgiveness and attract more young people to the field. We need to build the behavioral health workforce pipeline by increasing the availability and affordability of graduate education opportunities. Additional efforts and investment are essential

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to building capacity in higher education training programs and supporting schools' efforts to recruit and retain school mental health professionals. Loan forgiveness would create a powerful incentive to enter these critical fields and could help greatly to reduce shortages.

We have a compelling interest in expanding school health services and strengthening the coordinated support within our communities. We must facilitate partnerships between our institutions of higher education (IHE), Maryland State Department of Education (MDSE), and Local Education Agencies (LEAs). This will strengthen our capacity to train and retain a robust and highly qualified behavioral health workforce and improve the pipeline of school-based mental health providers.

The **Blueprint for Maryland's Future** includes an expansion of school health and mental health personnel and services in schools. **Our Committees (MHAC & AODAAC), advocate for robust efforts to address shortages in mental health and behavioral health professionals. We also advocate** for comprehensive mental health systems, which includes expanding school health and mental health personnel and services in schools and strengthening program and resource coordination through Maryland Department of Health, Behavioral Health Administration and Maryland State Department of Education. We are eager to support the state in pursuing the necessary policy changes needed to maximize opportunities to increase behavioral health professionals and services in all sectors across schools and communities and improve school-community behavioral health partnerships.

For all the reasons cited above, we urge you to support HB0488, with an amendment to include substance use treatment providers. This legislation would be an important step in working to increase the number of qualified, well-trained school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, and other mental health, and substance use treatment professionals that provide school-based mental health services to students.

Sincerely,



Susan Kerin, Chair,
Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee.



Laura Mitchell, Chair
Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Advisory Council