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## HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS TESTIFY FOR GREATER ACCESS TO CRITICALLY-NEEDED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES

*Keep the Door Open Act supports community health providers treating Marylanders with mental health and substance use disorders*

**Annapolis, Md.** (February 16, 2016) – Community health providers, clinicians, mental health and substance use disorder advocates and family members of individuals receiving treatment will testify before the Maryland House of Delegates Health and Government Operations Committee this afternoon in favor of the Keep the Door Open Act ([House Bill 595](#) / [Senate Bill 497](#)). The Act would increase access to behavioral health care by ensuring community-based providers have reliable and stable support in Maryland's budget. Behavioral health is a term that covers the full range of mental and emotional well being, including mental health and substance use disorders.

More than one million Marylanders live with mental health issues or substance use disorders and nearly 180,000 Maryland children and adults use and depend on the public behavioral health system. Advocates say that demand for services is steadily increasing in Maryland, with the number of people using our public behavioral health system increasing 65 percent since the start of the recent economic downturn.

“Funding for behavioral health providers has simply not kept up with the cost of living,” said Dan Martin, director of public policy for the Mental Health Association of Maryland. “If these medical professionals can't afford to treat those who need it, they'll close up shop – and we'll be shutting the door on our most vulnerable Marylanders.”

The legislation indexes the behavioral health provider rates, which have only had six modest increases in the last 20 years, to the cost of medical inflation. Advocates say the Keep the Door Open Act is critical to attract and retain qualified licensed professionals and direct care workers by ensuring fair and stable provider rates. Community behavioral health providers administer traditional outpatient services, mobile treatment, crisis services, withdrawal management, rehabilitation, residential treatment, vocational services and housing.

“Staff turnover and vacant positions are extremely high in this demanding field,” said Shannon Hall, executive director of the Community Behavioral Health Association of Maryland. “Years of stagnant funding have resulted in Marylanders losing critical access to behavioral health care.”

Behavioral health includes substance use disorder treatment and Maryland's growing opioid overdose rate prompted Governor Larry Hogan to establish the Heroin and Opioid Emergency Task Force, which released its findings in December. Use of illicit drugs has steadily increased in Maryland over the past four years and now exceeds the national average, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's recently released 2015 Behavioral Health Barometer.

"We have a public health emergency in Maryland," said Nancy Rosen-Cohen, executive director of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence. "If we want to stem this opioid epidemic, we need more community services, recovery support and preventive care. We're very pleased that the Governor's budget includes a 2 percent provider rate increase for this year – but we still need treatment dollars so that we can save people's lives due to Maryland's overdose epidemic."

"Children and youth are particularly vulnerable when it comes to mental health or substance use disorders – especially if they don't have access to proper treatment," said Ann Geddes, director of public policy for Maryland Coalition of Families for Children's Mental Health. "We have an urgent need to strengthen the corps of dedicated providers serving Maryland's children."

Advocates point out that behavioral health treatment works and is a good investment. If Marylanders cannot receive the behavioral health services they need, studies show they often end up receiving costly emergency room and inpatient services or going without care altogether.

The Keep the Door Open Act will be heard this afternoon in the House of Delegates Health and Government Operations Committee, Room 240 in the House Office Building in Annapolis. The lead sponsor of House Bill 595 is Delegate Antonio Hayes of Baltimore City. The lead sponsor of Senate Bill 497 is Senator Guy Guzzone of Howard County.

The Behavioral Health Coalition also plans a "Keep the Door Open Maryland" rally for February 25 at noon on Lawyers Mall in Annapolis. More than 500 attendees are expected to attend and support the coalition's [legislative platform](#).

Advocates are tweeting about the campaign using [#KeeptheDoorOpenMd](#).

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***The Behavioral Health Coalition of Maryland is a diverse mix of more than 40 non-governmental organizations working together to ensure individuals affected by mental health and substance use disorders have high quality and accessible services for their needs. [www.KeeptheDoorOpenMd.org](http://www.KeeptheDoorOpenMd.org)***