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Maryland Behavioral Health Coalition Announces 2019 Legislative Agenda

Four key priorities would expand access to high quality behavioral health treatment

Annapolis, Md. (January 7, 2018) – The Maryland Behavioral Health Coalition, a broad group of more than 50 nonprofit organizations, released its 2019 [legislative agenda](#) today. The group outlined a series of priorities for ensuring that every Marylander has access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment when and where needed.

One priority for the Coalition is increasing school behavioral health supports to improve student outcomes. As the Kirwan Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education continues to deliberate on how to enhance public education in Maryland, the Coalition aims to ensure the state prioritizes expanding access to behavioral health resources for Maryland schoolchildren.

“When students have access to quality behavioral health services they need to succeed, both student health and educational outcomes improve,” said Dan Martin, senior director of public policy for the Mental Health Association of Maryland. “Although it appears that full implementation of the Kirwan Commission’s recommendations has been delayed, we urge the legislature to find solutions to support Maryland students with behavioral health needs.”

The Coalition will also work to ensure the legislature and Governor Hogan fully fund their “Keep the Door Open” budget commitments in the next fiscal year. Passed in 2017 as part of the HOPE Act, the Keep the Door Open Act provided a long overdue boost in funding for community behavioral health services. In 2018, the legislature enacted multi-year funding initiatives to expand crisis response services and improve the delivery of behavioral health care in primary care settings. The Coalition will watch those funding levels to ensure these commitments are honored in the fiscal year 2020 budget.

In addition, the Coalition is pursuing legislation to expand access to medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and other substance use treatment options. Maryland overdose deaths increased in 2017 for the seventh year in a row to an all-time high of 2,282. Opioid-related deaths rose again over the first six months of 2018.

“Medication-assisted treatment is the gold standard for substance use treatment, but it is woefully underutilized,” said Delegate Erek Barron, lead sponsor of a planned bill to expand access to MAT in

state and local correctional facilities. “With the opioid epidemic continuing to ravage our state, we must ensure we are using all the best tools available to help Marylanders in need.”

Finally, the Coalition is exploring solutions to divert behavioral health patients from expensive emergency room and hospital care and instead direct people to community health services that reach people earlier and are more effective over the long term.

“Demand for mental health and substance use treatment services has steadily increased,” said Nancy Rosen-Cohen, executive director of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Maryland. “New laws and initiatives have helped to expand access to treatment services, but these efforts must be appropriately enforced and expanded to ensure Marylanders can access the most appropriate level of care for their needs.”

More than 1 in 5 Marylanders will experience a mental health or substance use disorder in any given year. Over 260,000 Marylanders now rely on the state’s public behavioral health system.

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The Behavioral Health Coalition of Maryland is a diverse mix of more than 50 nonprofit 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