



**Testimony on SB 211
Labor and Employment – Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program –
Establishment (Time to Care Act of 2021)**

Senate Finance Committee

January 28, 2021

POSITION: OPPOSE

The Community Behavioral Health Association of Maryland (CBH) is the leading voice for community-based providers serving the mental health and addiction needs of vulnerable Marylanders. Our 95 members serve the majority of those accessing care through the public behavioral health system. CBH members provide outpatient and residential treatment for mental health and addiction-related disorders, day programs, case management, Assertive Community Treatment (ACT), employment supports, and crisis intervention.

From the outset we want to state our strong support of our workforce and the sponsor's efforts to make their lives better. They are the backbone of what we do and are critical to the programs we provide for those with serious mental illness and substance use disorders. That is why our member organizations try to be as generous as they can within the bounds of their rates – which are set by the State Medicaid program – in offering flexible leave benefits and perks to attract potential employees to jobs that don't pay competitive salaries. Our opposition to this bill is rooted in the unintended impact we believe it will have on our employees and clients.

We are concerned about the impact on employees, particularly at the low end of the pay scale. While 0.75% of an employee's wage may not seem like much, our members note that few direct care staff avail themselves of 403(b) plans made available to them because of the employee contribution required. Their salaries are so low that many find it difficult to afford housing and other necessities. Some work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Investments – even ones such as 403(b) plans that would directly benefit them – are simply unaffordable for them. This bill would require those same employees to contribute to a fund they may never benefit from.

Similarly, direct care employees tend not to enroll in short-term disability plans if there is an employee contribution required. Many of our member organizations absorb the total cost of short-term disability for their employees and question their ability and rationale for continuing to do so if this bill passes.

One of our greatest concerns is the effect this bill would have on staffing. Our member organizations already struggle with attracting and retaining their workforce due to the low salaries and demanding nature of direct care work; some report staff vacancy rates as high as 50%. These vacancies are exacerbated by the number of employees on extended or intermittent leave (such as that covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and the Maryland Health Working Families Act). Staffing is of particular concern in residential programs that operate 24/7 and often have shifts staffed with one or two employees. This bill would allow employees who have already taken 12 weeks of paid leave for their own qualifying health condition to then take an additional 12 weeks of paid leave for another qualifying condition, such as the birth of a child. We believe this will have a significant impact on our ability to ensure client health and safety, not to mention quality of care.

For these reasons we respectfully oppose SB 211.

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