



February 5, 2024

The Honorable Adrian C. Madaro
Chair, Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery
State House
24 Beacon Street, Room 33
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable John C. Velis
Chair, Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery
State House
24 Beacon Street, Room 513
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Please vote favorably on H.1979, *An Act establishing a child and adolescent behavioral health implementation coordinating council*, for the Joint Rule 10 deadline

Dear Chair Madaro, Chair Velis, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH), I write to urge you to report favorably from your Committee H.1979, *An Act establishing a child and adolescent behavioral health implementation coordinating council*, sponsored by Rep. Decker. This bill promotes equitable access to Comprehensive School-Based Behavioral Health (CSBH) for K-12 students across the Commonwealth.

Formed over a century ago, MAMH is dedicated to promoting mental health and well being, while preventing behavioral health conditions and associated disability. We are committed to advancing prevention, early intervention, effective treatment, and research for people of all ages. We seek to eliminate stigma and discrimination and advance full inclusion in all aspects of community life. This includes discrimination affecting not only people with behavioral health conditions, but also people who face unequal burdens and barriers to the protections and benefits of citizenship due to their race, ethnicity, gender identity, or disability status. MAMH has a demonstrated track record of furthering its mission by convening stakeholders across the behavioral health and public health communities; disseminating emerging knowledge; and providing subject matter expertise. MAMH is also an executive member of the Children's Mental Health Campaign (CMHC).

H.1979 creates a Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Implementation Coordinating Council. Chaired by the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children (BIRCh) Project at UMass, the council will be responsible for developing a three-year plan for the statewide implementation of Comprehensive School-Based Behavioral Health (CSBH). This planning effort will include guidance and support to districts, as well as clear goals and benchmarks for monitoring and evaluating key elements of CSBH implementation.

Services and supports for children are currently spread across multiple state agencies in our Commonwealth. The

Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Implementation Coordinating Council is so important in that it will bring these agencies together and elevate the conversation – and action – surrounding children’s mental health. The Council is charged with developing a coordinated and comprehensive approach. The aim is to break down silos, and support schools over the long term to help children succeed socially and emotionally.

The Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Implementation Coordinating Council will also be extremely action oriented. The bill stipulates that the Coordinating Council will develop the three-year plan for statewide implementation of CSBH within six months of its first meeting. The plan itself will be comprehensive, including elements such as: workforce expansion and retention; access to staff training and professional development; the use of evidence-based practices; and outcomes data specifications to include measures for identifying disparities for students from historically marginalized backgrounds. The plan will also be updated every three years to ensure quality, promote the use of current best practices, and address issues identified through the outcomes data.

The time to pass H.1979 and establish the Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Implementation Coordinating Council is now. According to the most recent data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly three in five (57%) U.S. teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021, representing a nearly 60% increase and the highest level reported over the past decade. Nearly one in three seriously considered attempting suicide. LGBTQ+ youth are also particularly vulnerable. The data showed that more than half of LGBTQ+ students had recently experienced poor mental health and more than 22% attempted suicide in the past year.ⁱ

Here in Massachusetts, in an online survey conducted by the MA Department of Public Health (DPH) between September and November 2020, almost half of all youth in Massachusetts (48%) reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row. This is 21% higher than data from the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Youth of American Indian/Alaskan Native and Multiracial race/ethnicity were more likely than white youth to report feelings of sadness and hopelessness. Youth in Massachusetts are also reporting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder-like (PTSD-like) reactions, including having nightmares, avoiding situations, constantly being on guard, and feeling numb or detached. Sixty-one percent of Queer youth, 55% of Non-binary youth, and 53% of youth that identify as Transgender report having at least three PTSD reactions during COVID. Youth with disabilities are twice as likely as youth without disabilities to report PTSD reactions.ⁱⁱ

School administrators, counselors, teachers, and staff are doing their best to deal with the youth behavioral health crisis. We need to support them, their students, and their overall school communities not just in the short-term, but over the long-term. The Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Implementation Coordinating Council will help us do just that. I urge the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use, and Recovery to favorably report H.1979 out of Committee in light of the Joint Rule 10 deadline. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Jessica Larochelle, MPH
Co-Director for Public Policy and Government Relations

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. U.S. Teen Girls Experiencing Increased Sadness and Violence. 13 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2023/p0213-yrbs.html>.

ⁱⁱ MA Department of Public Health (DPH). MA DPH Community Impact Survey. 4 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/covid-19-community-impact-survey-ccis-preliminary-analysis-results-full-report/download>.