

March 17, 2011

Dear Maryland House of Delegates Member:

As the President and CEO of Volunteers of America Chesapeake, an organization 115-years strong, providing high-quality services – including mental health services—to more than 9,000 men, women and children in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, I am outraged by the actions taken yesterday by the House Appropriations Health Subcommittee to increase cuts by more than \$6 million to an already slashed Public Mental Health System.

The Maryland Hygiene Administration budget now faces a total hit of more than \$12.2 million – with these additional cut increases and thanks to the 2.5% rate reduction – or \$11.3 million cut – for community mental health already in Governor Martin O'Malley's budget. The rate reduction for Mental Health is far greater than any other health provider group.

At a time when demand for these services is at an all-time high and barely two months past the Tucson tragedy, I believe such measures as those proposed are nothing short of irresponsible.

I am an advocate for, and understand the importance of, adequate funding for public education. However I am deeply disturbed that mental health funds are being used to restore cuts to an area that has historically remained untouched while mental health funding continues to take a beating. It is also important to note that according to MHA research, 1 in 5 children are currently living with mental illness in Maryland. Your investment in their education is wasted if they cannot receive the treatment they need to learn.

If these cuts are implemented the impact on community health – and the individuals organizations like mine serves – will be devastating. The number of people served by Maryland's Public Mental Health System has grown by 40% in just four years, yet funding has grown by only 17%. Our industry is currently facing a workforce crisis, with turnover rates around 41% for direct care employees. In the past three years Volunteers of America Chesapeake alone has witnessed a 12.5% increase in the need for our supportive Mental Health services. Yet in that same time we have been forced to cut more than 10% of our mental health rehabilitation services staff.

Simply stated Maryland deserves better. Maryland employees looking to obtain – or keep – Mental Health jobs deserve salaries that are not competing with unemployment benefits. Maryland residents currently dealing with mental illness deserve the services necessary to live the lives they desire. Because mental illness can attack any person at any point in their life – or as the tragedy in Tucson illustrated – impact any person at any point in their life – all Maryland residents and employees deserve a system that will protect and support them.

The cuts proposed do not do that – but instead send the message that Maryland is turning its back on Mental Health and walking away from an industry – and individuals – already struggling to survive. I urge you to think twice.

Sincerely,

Page 2

Volunteers of America Chesapeake

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Russell Snyder". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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