

**Testimony in Support of Georgia's Mental Health Parity Act (HB 1013)**  
*Updated as of March 25, 2022*

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**Atrium Health Navicent:**

"Atrium Health Navicent is committed to improving access to high quality health care and supports HB1013's expansion of access to mental health services across the state."

**Children's Healthcare of Atlanta:**

"Children's Healthcare of Atlanta fully supports HB1013, which will significantly improve mental health care, and the coordination of such care, for children and adolescents; as well as address mental health workforce efforts."

**Emory Healthcare:**

"Emory Healthcare supports mental health parity legislation which will improve quality of care and accessibility to Georgians battling mental health or substance abuse crisis."

**Georgia Hospital Association:**

"The Georgia Hospital Association is pleased to support House Bill 1013, the "Mental Health Parity Act.

"The bill notably aims to ensure compliance with the federal parity law by making sure that behavioral health patients have adequate health care coverage. The bill also addresses the mental health workforce shortage, providing for loan forgiveness for providers who enter the mental health profession and incentives for individuals to train as mental health professionals. Georgia ranks among the worst states regarding mental health care and bolstering the mental health provider workforce is essential in improving access to behavioral health care.

"Mental health and substance abuse struggles are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing our state's behavioral health care challenges is extremely important to every one Georgia's hospitals and patients. We are pleased that the Mental Health Parity Act lays out specific action items with the goal of ensuring that behavioral health patients can get the care they need, especially by helping expand access to behavioral health care in rural Georgia.

"The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recently issued a report showing a lack of parity for behavioral health benefits at the national level. With HB 1013, Speaker Ralston and the Georgia House of Representatives are taking important steps to move toward parity at the state level and ensure behavioral health patients can access essential care.

"GHA looks forward to working with the bill sponsors to ensure passage and address behavioral health challenges in our state." – *Earl Rogers, GHA President and CEO*

**Grady Health System:**

"Grady Health System, as the largest healthcare provider of behavioral health services in Georgia, supports House Bill 1013 as a very powerful step to improve the overall health of people and communities across the state. We are pleased the bill elevates mental health to the same playing field as physical health because we see every day how people cannot have one without the other. HB 1013 will increase much needed access to behavioral health services."

**Piedmont Health System:**

"Piedmont Healthcare treats patients in every corner of Georgia, and our providers and frontline responders understand firsthand the critical need for mental health reform. Furthermore, as the employer of almost 45,000 Georgians, we believe this legislation will help strengthen individuals, families and communities while ensuring a pipeline of future health care providers. Piedmont believes HB 1013 is the most significant and meaningful piece of healthcare legislation in a decade and commends the General Assembly for its important work on this issue. We strongly support HB 1013 and stand ready to be a partner in its implementation after passage."

**Northeast Georgia Health System:**

"The Northeast Georgia Health System is pleased to support House Bill 1013, the "Mental Health Parity Act." This bill, sponsored by Georgia House of Representatives Speaker David Ralston and drafted by the Behavioral Health Reform and Innovation Commission, offers potential solutions for behavioral health care challenges in our communities and is much needed. As long time partners with the Georgia Council on Substance Abuse we are pleased to support this much needed effort for those individuals in our community." – *Deborah Robinson Bailey RN, BSN, MSN, Executive Director of Government Affairs, Northeast Georgia Health System*

**Tanner Health System:**

"Willowbrooke at Tanner consists of a 92-bed inpatient behavioral health hospital located in Villa Rica. We have struggled with parity issues for many years and feel that HB1013 is a tremendous first step in focusing on behavioral health delivery in Georgia."

**Wellstar Health System:**

“Wellstar Health System is a firm supporter of bipartisan House Bill 1013 aimed at improving the quality and availability of behavioral health and substance abuse treatment services in the State of Georgia. Now, more than ever, Georgians deserve comprehensive reform to the State’s delivery of mental health care. As the provider of care to one in six Georgians, Wellstar urges passage of this important legislation on behalf of all those battling a mental health or substance abuse crisis.”

**American Academy of Pediatrics:**

“The Georgia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics represents over 1800 pediatricians in our great state. We write today to share our views on the House “mental health parity bill” (HB1013). Pediatricians, often out of necessity, are the largest provider of mental health services to children and adolescents; and certainly, many times the first professional to observe mental health issues in their patients. No issue, perhaps even Covid-19 itself, has troubled pediatricians more than the pervasive rise of mental health issues in our young patients. Before the pandemic, the situation was near crisis--the pandemic has made it far worse.”

**Metro Atlanta Chamber:**

“The Metro Atlanta Chamber strongly supports House Bill 1013, the Mental Health Parity Act, landmark legislation that would significantly improve Georgians’ access to mental healthcare.”

“We believe addressing mental health is a critical aspect to a safe and prosperous Georgia, and we are encouraged that the Mental Health Parity Act includes several provisions that would improve public safety and support a healthy workforce by enhancing mental health resources. For instance, House Bill 1013 would: implement a state network of co-response teams with at least one peace officer and one social worker to increase access to pre-arrest diversion; provide law enforcement and frontline responders with increased resources, training, and flexibility to treat individuals in crisis; establish a task force to help local communities keep individuals with serious mental illness out of jails and into treatment; and increase Georgia workers’ access to treatment for mental health and substance abuse disorders.”

“The Metro Atlanta Chamber enthusiastically supports the Mental Health Parity Act and respectfully requests you vote YES on House Bill 1013. We believe mental health and public safety are inextricable, and we applaud the Mental Health Parity Act for its innovative efforts to address public safety concerns while ensuring a healthy workforce through the provision of comprehensive mental health resources.” – *Marshall Guest, Senior Vice President, Business Climate*

**Georgia Chamber of Commerce:**

"The Georgia Chamber supports providing all Georgians, including employers and their employees with access to modernized, timely and quality healthcare which includes access to mental health services addressed in House Bill 1013. We applaud the work of Speaker Ralston and the Georgia House in thoroughly vetting and passing this innovative legislative proposal with bipartisan support, and we appreciate the Georgia Senate's thoughtful consideration in adopting this much-needed mental health initiative." – *David Raynor, Chief Public Affairs Officer*

**AT&T:**

"AT&T supports expanding access to mental health care for all Georgians. Mental health is as important as physical health. House Bill 1013 is a transformational bill that will expand access to care for thousands suffering in our state. I applaud Speaker Ralston's leadership on this critical issue." – *Vanessa Harrison, President of AT&T Southeast*

**University System of Georgia:**

"The University System of Georgia (USG) deeply appreciates Speaker Ralston and the Legislature's work to address mental health needs in Georgia, which builds on other efforts that are vital to the personal and educational success of students, faculty and staff. Thanks to the support of Governor Brian Kemp, USG in 2019 began what became a comprehensive Mental Health Initiative to significantly increase mental health services and support across the university system. While students and employees have proven to be remarkably resilient during the pandemic, the need for additional on-campus mental health resources has been heightened by the unique challenges they face right now. The system strongly supports expansion of similar efforts across the state." – *Acting Chancellor Teresa MacCartney*

**Prosecuting Attorneys' Council:**

"There exists a critical need for mental health care programs and resources here in Georgia. Furthermore, a comprehensive and collaborative approach is necessary to ensure that these services are available throughout the State." – *Pete Skandalakis, Executive Director*

**Former Governor Nathan Deal:**

I commend my good friend Speaker David Ralston for his bold vision and political courage in spearheading mental health reform. It's a complex, challenging and persistent problem that does not have an easy solution or a quick fix. However, it's a critically important issue that affects Georgians of every background and all walks of life. The Speaker's passion, patience and leadership have resulted in meaningful legislation that will truly improve the lives of suffering individuals across our state.

Sandra and I watched this same determination and heart years ago when he helped lead Georgia to enact historic tax reforms, nationally-recognized transportation investment and comprehensive criminal justice reforms. I'm proud to call him a friend and to have worked with him, and Sandra and I fully support his efforts on this legislation.

**Georgia Sheriff's Association:**

Our law enforcement officers respond to mental health crises on a daily basis. They know firsthand the suffering it brings and the danger it can lead to. The Georgia Sheriff's Association has been an integral part of the mental health reform process from the very beginning. We remain committed and engaged on this critical issue as it works its way through the legislative process. We look forward to passage of meaningful reform that allows law enforcement to protect the communities they serve as well as keep our officers safe.

**America's Health Insurance Plans:**

America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP)<sup>1</sup> appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on H.B. 1013, entitled the Mental Health Parity Act. Mental health is a key component to a person's overall well-being and health insurance providers remain steadfast in our support of promoting safe, evidence-based behavioral health care on par with medical/surgical care. AHIP is committed to working with the Georgia General Assembly to highlight best practices in demonstrating parity between behavioral health care and medical/surgical care.

Health insurance providers are working hard to ensure that behavioral health treatment is covered at levels that are on par with physical health treatment. Our members work diligently to ensure compliance with the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA). Health plans are dedicated to ensuring individuals have access to all necessary tools to address their behavioral health needs, including by broadening networks and services to help enrollees navigate issues like loneliness, stress, depression, anxiety, and addiction; enhancing the availability of tele-behavioral health visits; and working with different innovative partners to widen the availability of care and new approaches, such as through digital resources like meditation and newly developed emotional wellness apps.

AHIP appreciates the General Assembly's focus on this important issue and looks forward to constructive collaboration.

**Eric Lewkowiez, M.D, M.S., DFAPA, DFAACAP, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Health Behavior at Augusta University | Medical College of Georgia:**

I am writing to express full support for HB 1013. As a practicing Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist in Georgia for the past 25 years and a member of the Child and Adolescent Subcommittee of the Behavioral Health Reform and Innovation Committee, I have seen the disastrous effects of mental illness on our children, who represent our future. In the last 2 ½ years, I have seen a subjective worsening among our children as a result of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental Health providers that were unable to handle the influx of patients requesting services prior to the pandemic are completely overwhelmed by requests for services. At my institution, we are typically getting greater than 80 requests per week from patients wanting to start services, yet our availability allows 10 new slots per week. This means nearly 87.5% of those seeking services cannot be accommodated. This concerning trend is being echoed by our Community Service Boards and other providers across the state.

At most risk are our children in foster care. 80% percent of children in foster care have significant mental health issues vs. 18-22% of the general population. In addition, children in foster care are prescribed psychotropic medication at a much higher rate than non-foster care youth. We have learned over the last 5-10 years that children's exposure to adverse (frequently traumatic) events (ACES) leads to the development of increasing numbers of mental and physical health issues. Through a process called epigenetic modification, stressful events in the environment cause the expression of genes that are usually not expressed. As a result, it should not be surprising to learn that 21.5 % of Foster Care Alumni have been diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) vs. only 4.5 % of the General Adult Population. The early treatment of trauma in children prevents the development of PTSD and other mental health conditions such as major depression, social phobia, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and drug and alcohol abuse in adolescents and adults.

It is estimated that the lifetime costs associated with new child maltreatment cases in 2020 was \$147 Billion. Much of that is in lost productivity \$102 Billion, Healthcare \$29.8 Billion, Special education \$5.5 Billion, Child Welfare \$5.4 Billion, and Criminal Justice \$4.6 Billion. It is my sincerely belief that any expenditure that result in the passage of this bill would save our taxpayers in the future.

I thank you for permitting me to share my thoughts with you and pray that you will do right by our children by passing HB 1013.

**Georgia School Superintendents Association:**

I write to support the current version of HB 1013. The bill is appropriately known as The Mental Health Parity bill. Speaking from the perspective of an educator and former law enforcement, I have witnessed many mental health crises in adults and children. This bill will level the treatment and support provided to the patients. I know the sponsors of the bill have a great deal of knowledge and empathy for the mental health crisis that has been raging in our state for many years. I believe this a move in the proper direction and it will quickly have a positive impact and place Georgia on a much better path in treatment and support of those individuals dealing with these mental health related diagnoses. This bill's content has the potential to reach all ages and levels of behavioral and mental health needs that have gone neglected for many years.

Please support HB 1013 and let's begin the process of healing for a segment of our population that has been lacking in support and care for a long time. I know our schools, hospitals, and public safety communities will certainly appreciate the structure of support let alone the balanced treatment to patients that are in dire need of the services this specific legislation will offer them. This a very comprehensive approach to these complex services! – *John Zauner, Executive Director*