



October 3, 2016

The Honorable Lawrence J. Hogan, Jr.
Governor of Maryland
Maryland State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Governor Hogan,

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) thanks you and your Administration for your work to address the statewide substance abuse crisis and urge your continued efforts. Despite a vigorous undertaking with widespread support and action to confront substance abuse, Maryland is still within the grips of an opioid and heroin crisis, with deaths and serious incidents still rising.

Local governments and their citizens are still feeling the impacts of addiction. MACo stands as a ready and willing partner to advance the health and safety of our communities. We hope you find the following comments helpful as Maryland continues to battle this crisis.

Setting a Strong Prevention and Education Base

The sudden and swift rise of the heroin and opioid crisis necessitated immediate focus on expanding access and availability of treatment and addressing threats to public safety. However, counties still firmly believe that education and prevention efforts are integral to stemming the growth of the crisis. This is both a short-term and long-term effort.

In 2015, MACo championed legislation that modernized the Substance Abuse Treatment Options Partnership (STOP) program – Senate Bill 641. The bill, which you signed into law, directed the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Maryland State Department of Education to work together to improve substance abuse education and outreach to Maryland students and their families. Counties believe outreach should begin earlier and in an age-appropriate manner and that curricula should be modernized. The sooner and more thoroughly we educate our youth, the better prepared they will be when confronted with substance abuse personally or within their families.

Recommendations from the Heroin and Opioid Emergency Task Force reinforced our beliefs and the need to address these concerns. According to the 2016 Mid-Year Report to the Governor from the Inter-Agency Heroin and Opioid Coordinating Council, work has begun on training school faculty and staff on signs of student addiction, as well as on promoting evidence-based prevention strategies that develop refusal skills. A user-friendly educational online toolkit has also been shared with the local school systems. MACo urges the Administration to continue and strengthen these efforts.

Breaking Barriers and Alleviating Burdens

Great strides have been made to launch innovative programs in counties across the state. The nature of this crisis has compelled officials to think outside the box to address the issue from all angles. However, counties still feel the pressure of limited resources and longstanding barriers.

Local health departments are adjusting to the state's move from a grant-based model for substance abuse treatment to a fee-for-service model. The shift seeks to expand and leverage federal Medicaid funding for behavioral health services. While this goal is laudable, obstacles exist that limit the potential advantages of the shift from being fully realized. Not all services delivered are billable under Medicaid. Further, individuals needing treatment who are underinsured and/or ineligible for Medicaid may go completely unserved. This weakness poses a great risk both to these individuals and to our communities.

A well-conceived backup plan is needed to prevent these unintended gaps. Steps should be taken to remove barriers within Medicaid that limit the ability to deliver necessary services, and to ensure that any such gaps are recognized and addressed.

Leveraging Resources and Investing in the Future

Counties are grateful for the financial support the Administration has provided. In recent months, counties have been awarded grants that have enabled them to sustain or launch new programs. Maryland's first day reporting center was made possible only through a partnership and combined investment from the Administration and Washington County. This model – both in service innovation and collaborative funding – needs to expand rapidly across the state.

MACo urges the Administration to continue to invest in these grant opportunities. Competitive grants foster innovation and provide counties with an opportunity to pilot new programs. Matching grants enable state and local governments to leverage valuable and limited resources. Federal grants offer an additional funding source and partnership opportunity with our federal counterparts. Strategic grant funding can make limited resources go a long way as we work together to ameliorate this crisis.

One avenue for expanding investment is to increase grant funding for local management boards to target at-risk youth. Or, additional grant monies could be directed to the STOP fund where a local “match” provides funding for certain critical populations and services. A new competitive or matching block grant could be created to target the aforementioned gaps and areas in need of strengthening.

Conclusion

Over the past two years, Maryland has strengthened the prescription drug monitoring program; expanded programs to provide life-saving training and medication for overdoses; improved enforcement and penalties for drug trafficking; passed sweeping criminal justice reform that will help get more individuals into treatment; and took steps to expand access and availability of treatment.

Much has been accomplished, but our work is not done. Marylanders benefit from a strong, coordinated, and continued plan to address addiction and the impact it has on our communities. MACo stands ready to partner in these efforts. Together, we must work to bring an end to this crisis that has been gripping our communities.

Sincerely,



John F. Barr
President, MACo
Commissioner, Washington County



Michael Sanderson
Executive Director, MACo

- CC: The Honorable Boyd Rutherford, Lieutenant Governor
Craig Williams, Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor
Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor
Tiffany Robinson, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor
Kristal Quarker Hartsfield, Director, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
Chris Shank, Chief Legislative Officer, Office of the Governor
Katie Wunderlich, Deputy Legislative Officer, Office of the Governor
Richard Tabuteau, Senior Advisor, Office of the Lieutenant Governor
Van T. Mitchell, Secretary, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
Karen B. Salmon, State Superintendent of Schools