



## **Testimony for the 2018 Budget Hearing before the Department of Behavioral Health**

### **Marisa Parrella, LICSW, Senior Clinical Manager School Based Mental Health Program**

My name is Marisa Parrella and I am the Senior Clinical Manager for the Mary's Center School Based Mental Health Program. We partner with 16 schools in Washington, DC in Wards 1, 4, and 5 to provide on-site mental health services and have done so successfully for the past 4 years. We do so independently as a Federally Qualified Health Center and bill Medicaid and other insurances for mental health services provided to students in the school setting. This gives us the capacity to have served, thus far in the 2017 school year, approximately 800 children and youth with assessments and treatment. Our full time presence in each partner school allows us to serve additional children in more preventive capacities as well as provide much needed support to staff and families, in collaboration with existing wellness teams.

Mary's Center enjoys a long history of serving the DC Metropolitan communities through our social change model of providing health care, social services, and education. Our school based program springs from this model, reaching our children on site in schools with children as the access point to families. Our therapists and community support workers provide mental health care to students and ensure families access health care and social services. The holistic care ensures family units are strengthened, accelerating children's emotional, behavioral, and academic gains. Over time, schools throughout the city have submitted inquiries to partner with our program. Starting with 2 schools 4 years ago, we have expanded into over 16 schools in Wards 1, 4, and 5 to meet school demand for our services.

As a Core Service Agency (CSA) with the Department of Behavioral Health, Mary's Center enjoys a partnership that began in 2005 and will continue to partner to deliver services to children and families. As a CSA, Mary's Center implements health center based assessment, therapy, psychiatry, and community support, and is a credentialed Health Home Provider. However, our School Based Mental Health services remain a separate service from the CSA status, and that said, we recognize the need for transformation of the DBH School Based Mental Health Program. From our experience working with DBH therapists in the schools and partnering in committees and other meetings that support the early childhood system, it is clear that the DBH School Based program can work to offer more equitable and comprehensive services to all schools the district. Mary's Center maximizes federal dollars to bill for mental health services. We utilize part DBH billing for community support services and part grant money to provide professional development and teacher consultation.



The new plan announced has not yet released specific details about implementation but aims to put the onus of clinical intervention services on the Core Service Agencies while DBH will resume providing Preventive Services with their existing 66 Licensed Mental Health Therapists by assigning them across several schools. Our concerns are threefold:

- First, discontinuing mental services for children in 66 of the highest need schools just 3 months before the onset of a new school year risks exacerbation of children’s learning, symptoms, and functioning.
- Second, Core Service Agencies do not have the capacity – over the course of only 3 months - to enter into school partnerships, hire and train qualified and licensed clinicians, and ensure even close to the behavioral health coverage of 177 Public and Charter Schools.
- Finally, core service agencies have not been offered any training, capacity building, or funding to be successful in this effort.

Mary’s Center has built a successful intervention model using insurance reimbursement, primarily Medicaid, and seeks opportunities to build an even more comprehensive model of School Based Services. We ask that the council:

- 1.) Identify and allocate funds for a working group/consultant to re-examine the current SBMH structure/needs citywide, and allow for the development of a comprehensive plan with a realistic timeline for implementation.
- 2.) Dedicate funding for the development of a strategic plan for capacity building for Core Service Agencies combined with a slower implementation of the new school based mental health service plan that includes relevant stakeholder input.

Mary’s Center’s mission to build better futures through the delivery of healthcare, education, and social services is an approach that sets participants on the path toward health, stable families, and economic independence. With this, we have learned over the years the importance of public private partnerships and community collaborations. We welcome the opportunity to share our experience with others, provide training and guidance on lessons learned, and help to support the transformation of the SBMH system. Thank you for allowing me to share my testimony with you.