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January 27, 2021

Contact: [Vincent DeMarco](#)
410-591-9162

Senate Budget & Taxation Committee to hear Testimony on Bill to Create Health Equity Resource Communities and Expand Health Care in Underserved Areas

The Senate Budget & Taxation Committee will hear testimony at 1 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 27th, on [SB 172](#), which would establish Health Equity Resource Communities (HERC) in areas of Maryland that lack access to health care services.

More than 270 groups around the state have signed on in support the legislation. Under the proposed legislation, areas with poor health outcomes can become HERC communities and be able to compete for grants, tax incentives and health care provider loan repayment assistance to increase access to high-quality care. Over time, the bill is designed to close health inequities based on race, ethnicity, disability, and geography.

Funding for the Communities, as well as new programs to address substance use and mental health disorders, will come from a one penny per dollar increase in the state alcohol beverage sales tax. The bill, sponsored in the Senate by Sen. Antonio Hayes of Baltimore, has won the support of Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, and County Executives Angela Alsobrooks of Prince George's County, Calvin Ball of Howard County, Marc Elrich of Montgomery County, Johnny Olszewski of Baltimore County and Stuart Pittman of Anne Arundel County, and is part of House Speaker Adrienne Jones' Black agenda for this year's legislative session.

"The General Assembly must act this year to expand access to health care services in areas of the state that have historically lacked good access," said Sen. Hayes. "We need to be aggressive in allocating the resources needed to make sure every Marylander can have the care they need to lead a healthy life, no matter their zip code."

Testifying along with Sen. Hayes will be Michelle Spencer, Associate Chair for Inclusion, Diversity, Anti-Racism, and Equity, Department of Health, Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; Victoria W. Bayless, Chief Executive Officer of Luminis Health (includes Luminis Health Anne Arundel Medical Center, Luminis Health Doctors Community Medical Center, Anne Arundel Medical Group) and Vincent DeMarco, president of the Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative (MCHI), which is leading the effort to pass the legislation.

"We have broad support for this legislation from people and organizations across the state, including the Johns Hopkins Institutions," DeMarco said. "We can no longer tolerate Maryland's

health disparities, which are often based on race or geography. And increasing the tax on alcohol slightly is a smart way to generate the resources we need to make this initiative effective. We can bring down problem drinking and devote new funds to health care.”