

**Sharnetta Boone-Ruffin**  
**Department of Behavioral Health**  
**Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony**  
**Committee on Health**  
**February 1, 2023**

Good Afternoon,

My name is Sharn Boone-Ruffin. I am a PAVE Citywide and Ward 8 Parent board member and a multiple generation Washingtonian. In fact Lawrence E. Boone Elementary School was named after my grandfather. My daughters Shaunah and Shaunyce attend Jefferson Middle School Academy and Eagle Academy Public Charter School-Capitol Riverfront both in SW Ward 6. I chose Jefferson because of the rich culture, history, positive student reviews I heard at Edfest, and I'm an alumni. I chose Eagle Academy because my oldest attended and successfully completed Prek3-3rd at the Congress Heights location, where she received an amazing education. It was family centered, secured, great programs and staff showed they cared about the social emotional health of each student.

We are in a Mental Health crisis all over the US, however here in the Nation's Capital we see and hear about killings multiple times a day, particularly in high poverty wards like Wards 7 and 8. In fact this morning there was a shooting at Potomac Avenue metro station where a person got off of the bus and walked to the train platform, where he shot 3 people, unfortunately killing a metro employee who was protecting a customer from this individual. Some Metro customers and citizens who were on the platform and train tackled and disarmed this individual until the police arrived. Every citizen including school age children should be trained in social emotional learning and some basic mental health training.

Social Emotional Learning has been a huge focus since returning to in person learning after COVID. However, some neighboring school districts added social emotional learning to their P.B.I.S. or Positive Behavior Interventions and Support plan before COVID. By training teachers, staff, administration, and security personnel on the importance of tending to social emotional needs, it creates a positive mental health wraparound service to all students. Having SBMH is essential sadly due to a lot of students unknowingly living in DC with PTSD, Anxiety, or some

other mental health disability. The everyday violence, lack of positive parental/ guardian guidance, stigma in the community forgetting mental health assistance. By receiving mental health services in school, students will be able to get the necessary mental health help they so desperately need. SBMH also includes group therapy sessions that have been shown to be beneficial to groups of people who have differences and are able to work it out with a mediator and/or mental health therapist. Receiving services at school will also help the parents/guardians not feel overwhelmed with trying to find their child mental help. Having these available services in the schools gives the student time to embrace, reflect, and use what was learned during sessions. Studies have shown having school based mental health and counselors present in schools, reduced suspensions, expulsions, fights, absenteeism as well as truancies. Having these professionals in the schools also can positively assist administration, staff, security personnel with students who may become disruptive or have a "meltdown", without anybody getting injured or worse. All kids are going through something in life whether it's visibly shown or hidden behind a smile, learning coping strategies and how to balance your own mental health should be top priority.

I believe Out of School Time programs could also assist with training school aged students with social emotional and mental health strategies. By teaching school aged students about their mental health they will be able to stop the stigma in their own household and their community. Children are our future. However we must train them for a better, safer and well balanced tomorrow.

I want to thank Councilmember Christina Henderson for her work on figuring out a way to do reciprocity with Maryland and hopefully in the future Virginia, as well. I would also like to thank Councilmembers Robert White, Kenyan McDuffie, Janeese Lewis George, Anita Bonds, Charles Allen, Vincent Gray, Brooke Pinto, Matthew Frumin, Zachary Parker, and Brianne Nadeau, for taking the first step towards getting more behavioral health degrees into the mental health field, by introducing The District's Pathways to Behavioral Health Degrees act of 2022 bill. This bill proposed that qualified applicants with bachelor's degrees would be given scholarships covering tuition and books, along with a monthly stipend for living expenses and transportation. Again this is a great first step, however more mental health professionals would be available to work in DC, if the criteria to get licensed to work in DC wasn't so tedious and expensive. Again reciprocity would be EXTREMELY helpful and will drastically close the Mental Health support gap.

While in graduate school I had to complete a practicum, internship, and CPCE. which is the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination before successfully completing my masters degree at Liberty University. However, while looking for a practicum and internship location, I kept hitting a wall looking for supervision due to organizations in DC looking for individuals already Nationally Board certified with experience NOT including practicum or internship. This was very disheartening after calling over 20 organizations in DC, looking for an opportunity. I finally was blessed with a “YES!” by a women of color who understood from her own personal experiences of receiving the run arounds to work in DC before given her break. With this Yes, I completed my practicum and internship as a school based mental health support staff at an early childhood educational center in DC. Without that opportunity I would not have been able to graduate on time. I am currently a Resident Marriage and Family Therapist in the state of Virginia, however at the time when I was looking to get provisional licensed in DC I was informed I would need to take the National Board Exam first before earning hours. This was disheartening to hear knowing financially I wasn’t able to front the exam payment that was close to \$400. For example Maryland and Virginia among other states allow for Masters-level (graduate) individuals to work in the field under a board certified supervisor for a specific amount of hours and years, before taking the state licensure test, not the mandatory National board Mental Health test that is needed to work in DC. This allows for a qualified individual that already has a masters in the counseling field or working towards a masters degree in the counseling field to receive hands-on experiences, like other careers who allow hands-on experiences in the field.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions.