

**Testimony for the Committee on Health Department of Behavioral Health Budget
Oversight Hearing
Friday June 4, 2021**

To: DC Council Committee on Health, Chairman Vincent Gray, Committee on Health Members, and Committee on Health Staff

From: Cassandra Gentry, Ward 6 Citywide Board member and Ward 6 PAVE Parent Leader

Date: June 4th, 2021

Good afternoon! My name is Cassandra Gentry and I'm one of over 1100 grandparents raising grandchildren in the District of Columbia. I'm here today because our children, residents, educators and my family need your support for Mental Health funding. Prior to the pandemic we were failing our children with not enough services for mental health. Now in recovery we are trying to capture what we've lost. We are grateful to the Mayor for committing to fully fund the school-based behavioral health expansion and ensuring that all schools will have access to at least one clinician. However, the \$5.8M investment is not sufficient to fully fund the expansion to all 83 schools. We are asking for you to allocate \$80,000 per school, which is a total of \$841,000 for all 83 schools, so every clinician can best meet all the needs of our students as they return to in-person learning this fall.

One in every five children in DC have suffered a loss. This has led to chronic stress from loss of lives, violence, family separation and social distancing. My granddaughter, who is 10, should be happy about going to middle school. Instead I have watched her go from building her self esteem to shutting down physically and emotionally over the last 6 months. She went from wanting to learn to not liking school at all. She doesn't want to communicate and often says she wants to be alone. Only in the last few weeks have I begun to feel some sense of hope, because I have been able to get ongoing weekly therapy for her. With out of school programs becoming available she is able to get a limited amount of social activity with other children her age. It will be very important that she continues to receive support with professionals in school. I know for her and many other children these services need to be available and continue for them to achieve academically. Educators, schools and mental health providers are faced with meeting our children where they are now and getting them to where they will be successful. Our children's lives have changed and now we have to make sure we address the whole child.

When you took your position it was a commitment to help DC residents by making sure that Mental Health Services would be provided to those in need. Now is the time to use both local and Federal funds to make sure that DBH can expand access to mental health professionals for

our children at 83 more schools. Mental Health support will not only help our children academically it will also reduce suicide, gun violence and help to make DC a better place to work and live. Together we can make our loss be our gain.

Sincerely,

Cassandra Gentry

Ward 6 PAVE Parent Leader