

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore signs bill requiring mental health training for public high school, college coaches

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It's a right of passage into Mike Locksley's Maryland football program to participate in the '3 H's' meeting. Newcomers stand before teammates, coaches and staff to share about their hero, a highlight of their life and a hardship. It's one of a few crucial Terps mental health touchpoints.

Head coach always goes first. By Locksley opening his heart, he's creating a space for shared vulnerability where others can see, "Coach has got some things he's really proud of," he said, "but also, he's faced some tough times."

Personal tragedy forged Locksley's path intertwining mental health with his football-filled life. Which is why he and his program are in favor of recently passed legislation that prioritizes steps to address the worsening mental health in [student-athletes](#).

Senate Bill 165, which was signed into law by Gov. Wes Moore on May 16, mandates all Maryland [public high school](#) and college institutions provide training for participating coaches to recognize indicators of mental illness and behavioral distress in students. That includes signs of depression, trauma, violence, youth suicide and substance abuse.

The bill, which passed with bipartisan support, takes effect July 1. Maryland follows Ohio as the second state to pass similar legislation for high school coaches but is first to include public universities.

Locksley's third H, his tragedy, is when he shares that his son, Meiko, was shot and killed in 2017. Meiko was 25, later diagnosed with

schizoaffective disorder, which can reveal itself through bipolar or depressive episodes. Burned into Mike's memory is the desolate look he saw in his once-buoyant son.

"It's almost like a glassy-eyed stare," he said. "Almost like you can see their soul through their eyes; which is what triggered me. Seeing that look in his eyes, I've seen that look before in players that I've coached in the past. At the time, I wasn't trained. Had no idea what it meant. I saw that stare in a number of players that have dealt with mental health issues that aren't familiar with it. It was almost eerie for me to see it. Like, why have I seen this before?"

Locksley and his staff have not yet taken formal training. But mental health is an ongoing conversation in College Park, starting from their 3 H's introduction and persisting with Thursday all-staff meetings — a scheduled space to take the pulse of the team.

Not every program is so active on the matter.

"Coaches have told us that they feel ill-equipped to deal with some of the things they see on the field, on the court or in the locker rooms," the bill's lead Senate sponsor, Sen. Shelly Hettleman, told The Baltimore Sun. "This will be a mechanism to get them better training on how to connect their players with services they need."

Hettleman previously helped pass the Jordan McNair Act, honoring the late Maryland football player and Randallstown native. The 2019 bill requires college programs to implement emergency-action plans for heat-related illnesses. Hettleman sees this legislation as another piece of that infrastructure, championing student-athlete health.

The frequency and breadth of SB165's training is reliant on a collective effort from Maryland's Department of Health, Higher Education

Commission, county boards of education and the Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association. Training could include red flags to look for, appropriate questions to ask, or how to create a safe space for vulnerable dialogue.

Columbia-based sports psychologist Dan Zimet told The Sun last year ease of utilization would be a determining factor for the bill's success.

"Coaches already have so much that they do," Zimet said. Current state law requires training in emergency action plans, seizure plans and operation of automatic external defibrillators.

"I think it's important," Zimet said, "for coaches to know they're not expected to provide any treatment. They're not expected to sit in on counseling sessions or to know what kind of doctor this person might need."

A 2022 study by the Aspen Institute surveying more than 10,000 coaches found that 18% of youth coaches feel highly confident in their ability to link athletes to mental health resources and 67% want more education on the subject. Similarly, more than 80% of NCAA coaches across all three divisions reported spending more time discussing mental health since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Johns Hopkins senior scientist Laura Murray said it's not uncommon coaches are initially hesitant to address mental health when, to them, it's taboo or just not in their wheelhouse. In her experience, those folks often leave referral-style trainings more comfortable on approaching the matter.

Second push success

A simple proposition for this bill was brought forward in June 2022 by a

former Baltimore City student-athlete dedicated to mental health advocacy. Marcus Alston had zero legislative experience. What he did have was a burning desire to make a difference.

By the 2023 legislative session, he had garnered the backing of one sponsor: Del. Dalya Attar, a Democrat from Baltimore City. But a late start hindered the bill's progress. It passed favorably through the House with amendments omitting language specifying "first-aid" training. By then, there was little time left for discourse in the Senate.

Alston proactively pre- and cross-filed in both chambers this time around. Again, it passed unanimously out of the House. The Senate made merely a technical amendment striking "mainstream" from the bill's description of athletic programs before a 45-0 vote.

Letters of opposition questioned the financial implications of training a massive number of participating coaches. The Maryland Association of Board of Education, for one, wrote that it supported the proposal with concerns calling the bill an unfunded mandate and addressing its standalone nature, meaning it does not include non-athletic school personnel.

Both were addressed.

The bill's fiscal policy notes state and local expenditures would be dependent on use of existing internal resources or external contractual work—the department of education recommended the National Federation of High Schools' free course. The NFSE already provides local school system's with courses for other required trainings. Expenditure impact, according to the fiscal policy, would be "minimal, if any."

Additionally, Sen. Malcolm Augustine, a Democrat from Prince

George's County and sponsor of the bill, pondered the question of expanding the bill beyond athletics to reach other after-school activities. The approach of this bill opted to start with sports, in part, citing the number of volunteer coaches who aren't otherwise school employees.

Support swelled heading this session with a slew of senators and delegates signing on as sponsors before and throughout the bill's progress. "We really made that a point of focus," said Alston, founder of Alston for Athletes and graduate of Mount Saint Joseph. "I just started blasting emails out."

A new wave of lobbyists, athletes, coaches and advocacy groups engaged as well, including write-in testimonies from former NFL player Marques Ogden, Morgan's Message and The Jordan McNair Foundation.

This second effort prompted impassioned, personal narratives on the Senate floor.

There was Leeann Passaro, a collegiate athlete turned teacher and coach at Indian Creek in Annapolis, pouring into the polarity of a decade-old memory. Home for the weekend in January 2014, she woke up warmly in her childhood bedroom the morning she found out a former teammate and classmate died by suicide. "I had so many questions," Passaro said, "And I didn't know how to ask them or who to ask them to."

Dr. Amy Ocasio gave a similarly gripping delivery in backing the bill — a mother recounting the horror of losing her son, Thomas Ocasio III, to suicide in 2019. To the Senate, Amy split her allotted two minutes between detailing personal tragedy and defending her dissertation on male coaches' perceptions of their role and capacity in supporting male student athletes' mental health.

"The bottom line," Ocasio read, "student athletes are wanting to talk and

coaches are wanting to be prepared."

Developing the framework

Matt Triplet was the architect of Ohio becoming the first state to require mental health training solely for participating high school coaches. The St. Francis DeSales boys lacrosse coach of 20 years was a useful resource for Alston's push in Maryland.

Triplet's guiding light was a 2018 encounter. A conversation with a student-athlete that he "went into confident" expecting a breakup or another comparably mild concern. When Triplet realized his player could be suicidal, it terrified him. The longtime coach drove home white knuckled praying nothing bad would happen — motivation enough to get himself trained and inspire others to do the same.

Ohio's mental health training bill was a multi-year process that helped set a legislative precedent.

Colorado, while bereft of legislation on the matter, also requires training through its High School Activities Association. Coaches have the option of taking the free "Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention" course through the National Federation of State High School Associations or taking their own district's training.

Triplet was a mentor to Alston in the process. But Alston's proactive [mental health](#) training ambitions don't end with his home state. Nor does he want to see national discourse crawl as slowly as Ohio last year, Maryland this year, perhaps another state in 2025, and so on.

In fact, Pennsylvania already has a bill that was introduced, House Bill 1367, that mirrors Alston's work. It was proposed originally by Representative Mary Jo Daley's former district office intern, Mek kai

Williams, a Temple student who gleaned inspiration from Alston's Maryland bill.

"We're trying to develop some sort of toolkit and framework," Alston said, "for the athletes in [other] states to start advocating for these types of things knowing that it might take two or three years to pass."

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