



Testimony to SUPPORT SB 904
Tracy Neal-Walden, Ph.D., Clinic Director & Senior Vice President,
Easterseals Military Family Clinic

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman and members of the committee:

For 100 years, Easterseals has been making profound, positive differences in the lives of people of all ages with disabilities, special needs, military backgrounds and their families. In September 2017, we opened the Easterseals Military Family Clinic to provide low or no-cost behavioral health services to veterans, their family members and the family members of active duty service members. **We urge the committee to support Senate Bill 904 to establish the Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program to ensure that behavioral health providers who serve veterans and service members have adequate resources to provide these critical services.**

There is great need for behavioral health services among veterans, service members and their families in Maryland. There are approximately 399,000 veterans living in Maryland, of which an estimated 24,000 have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.¹ Across the state, approximately 10,000 veterans are dealing with post-traumatic stress or major depression. We know that veterans comprise 18% of all deaths by suicide in Maryland and this group is twice as likely as non-veterans to die by suicide.² 12.4% of military suicides are by former National Guard and Reserve members who were never federally activated and therefore, not eligible for VA services.³

While the statistics are staggering, I see the faces and stories behind the numbers every day. As a licensed clinical psychologist, a retired Colonel who served in the Air Force for 24 years, and the Director of the Easterseals Military Family Clinic, I see the symptoms and challenges our veterans, service members, and their families are facing. Nearly half of the veteran and family member clients seen by my team of clinicians, many of whom are also veterans, are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress, depression or anxiety. These individuals and families have served our country, and we need to ensure that they receive the help and support they need to reach their potential and live meaningful lives.

We are all aware that the current capacity of government agencies cannot adequately address the behavioral health needs of our veterans and service members. There are often long waiting periods to get services at Veterans Administration (VA) facilities; depending on their discharge status, veterans may not be eligible to be seen by the VA; and family members of veterans are not serviced by the VA. For the family members of active duty military, the number of providers who accept military insurance may be limited, resulting in long waits for services. In addition, many healthcare providers may not have military cultural competency especially in regards to women veterans which is the fastest growing demographic in the military.

Community-based organizations like the Easterseals Military Family Clinic provide critical services to enhance available treatment resources and reduce the barriers to care. We are

¹ U.S. Department of Defense

² VA National Suicide Data Report 2005–2016, (Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention), September 2018

³ US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019 *National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*

able to see patients within one week, and even on the same day if needed. We ensure that veterans in crisis receive immediate services, and we provide case management for veterans and family members who need additional support. We are changing and saving lives every day. In the words of one of our clients:

“I would like to share and show my gratitude to the [Easterseals Clinic]. I have been coming here for over two or three months and [was] not sure of how it would all work out. But I am very glad that I made the call when I did, because my outlook on life and myself was pretty grim to say the very least. If I would not have found you all my next alternative was suicide for sure. But the Clinic has given the necessary place to heal and has given me the tools to fight back the demons in my own head and life. I will be forever indebted to and grateful for finding you all. My life will never be the same!”
—Stephen U.

While changing and saving lives is our primary mission, our early intervention and evidence-based treatment is helping to reduce the longer-term costs of care for veterans and military families. According to a recent Rand study,⁴ the long-term costs for PTSD and major depression in Maryland veterans ranges from \$130-\$200 million. The study estimates that early intervention with evidence-based treatments could save Maryland \$35-\$53 million over two years.

SB 904 is modeled after a law enacted by the Texas Legislature in 2015 (SB55), which provides \$20 million per year for veteran behavioral health care. SB 904 requests the governor **may** fund the program up to an annual budget of \$2.5 million to fund community-based veteran behavioral healthcare in Maryland. In this difficult budget year, we are suggesting that you pass the legislation to create the program and we can continue to work to get it funded. All state funds will be leveraged one-to-one with additional private funds, providing up to \$5 million per year in much needed services. The impact of this support will be dramatic and will provide a modicum of financial stability for the many nonprofit organizations serving this population.

In the 30 months since the Easterseals clinic has opened, we have seen over 540 clients from all regions of the state, and that number grows each week. Lamar Winslow, a former Marine Corps Captain served three tours of duty in Iraq in 2003, 2006, and 2007. He shares his story here: <http://bit.ly/Easterseals-Lamar>

“By the time I went to the Easterseals Clinic, I was in the middle of chaos [due to PTSD]. Everything was in shambles. My work life, my financial life, my relationship with my (now) wife, my relationship with family and friends...the clinicians gave me the gift of a life that’s worth living.” – Lamar Winslow

SB 904 is an important and highly cost-effective opportunity to honor the service of veterans and their families as they seek to reintegrate into society and contribute to their communities. **We urge the committee to submit a favorable report on SB 904 to change and save the lives of more veterans, their families, and the families of active duty service members in Maryland.**

Very Respectfully,
Tracy Neal-Walden

⁴ Tanielian, Terri and Jaycox, Lisa, editors, Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery (RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA), 2018