

Senate Bill 557 Suicide Treatment Improvements Act

Finance Committee

February 17, 2021

Position: SUPPORT

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness and substance use. We appreciate this opportunity to present testimony in support of Senate Bill 557.

HB 557 creates additional requirements for systems that interact with persons experiencing suicidal ideations and may be in crisis. It requires specific training for crisis hotline staff and police officers, updates to state psychiatric facilities, and prohibits insurance providers from charging for counseling and assessing suicidal individuals.

Mental health practitioners and experts have been on alert throughout the COVID-19 outbreak for signs of increased suicidality across all demographics. Calls to the Baltimore crisis hotline, Here2Help, doubled between April and July 2020, and as of September the number of callers threatening suicide was five times higher than at the beginning of the pandemic.¹ In Montgomery County alone, nearly 400 residents went to a hospital emergency room reporting self-injury or suicidal thoughts between July 1 and August 15, 2020.²

Rates of suicide completion have steadily risen in Maryland over the past two decades, and rates of reported suicidal ideation have grown too quickly during COVID-19 to be ignored.¹ SB 557 creates requirements that will improve the entry points to care for individuals in crisis and better their progress in receiving treatment. Additional training for the crisis hotline staff and police officers who have the first contact with these individuals and reducing the costs of care can remove barriers to care and save lives.

The requirements of SB 557 are necessary to help stop the rise of suicide completion in Maryland, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For these reasons, MHAMD supports SB 557 and urges a favorable report.

¹Wegner, Y. (2020, September 29). As coronavirus rolls on in Maryland, mental health toll surges, with experts fearing spike in suicides. Baltimore Sun. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/features/bs-hs-mental-health-covid-20200929-yzjfdfc2ijb4vab7o3v4g7q25a-story.html>

²Montgomery County. (2020, September 10). Montgomery County provides resources to help residents prevent and understand suicide during National Suicide Prevention Month. [Press Release]. Retrieved from https://www2.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcgportalapps/Press_Detail.aspx?Item_ID=26777