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HB 293-Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services—9-8-8 Trust Fund

Position: Support

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written comments in support of House Bill 293. This bill:

- Designates 988 as the primary phone number for the State’s behavioral health crisis hotline;
- Establishes a state fund to invest in crisis response services; and
- Establishes an initial \$10 million funding source for FY 2024 to support existing behavioral health crisis call centers in Maryland in carrying out crisis response services.

The Federal National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 designated 988 as the new phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which is expected to greatly increase the number of calls for help. Beginning in July 2022, all phone companies will route 988 calls to local crisis call centers that are part of the Lifeline network. The Lifeline network is comprised of 170 independently operated, independently funded local, regional, and state-level call centers. These centers provide crisis intervention services and crisis care coordination to individuals accessing suicide prevention and behavioral health services from any jurisdiction within the State 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Currently there are eight Lifeline-affiliated centers in Maryland that provide free, confidential emotional support to people calling for help, and have the expertise and relationships to local resources to efficiently link callers in crisis with the care they need.

As part of its mission, CareFirst is committed to driving transformation of the healthcare experience with and for our members and communities. We believe ensuring equitable access to quality, affordable behavioral health services is essential to advancing holistic care and improving health outcomes. In the absence of a robust, coordinated crisis response network, Marylanders are forced to rely on hospital emergency rooms and law enforcement to provide mental health and substance use crisis response services even though these are not the best settings for care. HB 293 will enhance access to Maryland’s crisis response system by creating an easily accessible, interstate, telephonic resource for Marylanders in need of crisis services. The bill will also provide funding to the centers in Maryland’s Lifeline network to accommodate the increase in utilization of behavioral health care services expected to result from the state’s adoption of 988.

CareFirst strongly supports the policy goals advanced by House Bill 293. We look forward to continued partnerships with legislators, the Maryland Health Department, mental health providers, public health groups, and other stakeholders to employ targeted strategies to improve the mental health and wellbeing of our members, provider partners, employees, and communities.

We urge a favorable report.

About CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield

In its 84th year of service, CareFirst, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, is a not-for-profit healthcare company which, through its affiliates and subsidiaries, offers a comprehensive portfolio of health insurance products

and administrative services to 3.4 million individuals and employers in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Northern Virginia. In 2019, CareFirst invested \$43 million to improve overall health, and increase the accessibility, affordability, safety, and quality of healthcare throughout its market areas. To learn more about CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, visit our website at www.carefirst.com and our transforming healthcare page at www.carefirst.com/transformation, or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) or [Instagram](#).