



Mission: To improve public health in Maryland through education and advocacy Vision: Healthy Marylanders living in Healthy Communities

HB 293: Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services-988 Trust Fund

Hearing Date: 2/2/2022

Committee: HGO

Position: SUPPORT

Chairperson Pendergrass and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee: The Maryland Public Health Association would like to express support for HB 293, sponsored by Delegate Young. This bill will designate 988 as the phone number for Maryland's suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis hotline, in addition to creating sustainable funding to support existing behavioral health crisis call centers.

Congress designated 988 as the new phone number the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. In July 2022, 988 will go live. Beginning then, all phone companies will route 988 calls to local crisis call centers that are part of the Lifeline network. The local crisis call centers provide 24/7 free, confidential emotional support to people calling for help. It is expected that calls to the Lifeline will significantly increase when the new number goes live and Maryland needs to ensure that its existing eight local call centers are adequately resourced to support this influx of calls for help.

Maryland is experiencing a major increase in overdose and suicide deaths, with 2,800 and 650 lives lost, respectively, in 2020. The pandemic only exacerbated an existing behavioral health crisis. With the risk of being killed by law enforcement being 16 times higher for individuals with untreated serious mental illness, alternatives are necessary to preserve lives and ensure the appropriate care is available. While there are existing call centers, they are overburdened and under supported for the needs of our population. This bill is a step in the right direction to ensure stability and expansion for our crisis response system.

We urge a favorable report on HB 293.

The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is a nonprofit, statewide organization of public health professionals dedicated to improving the lives of all Marylanders through education, advocacy, and collaboration. We support public policies consistent with our vision of healthy Marylanders living in healthy, equitable, communities. MdPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association, a nearly 145-year-old professional organization dedicated to improving population health and reducing the health disparities that plague our state and our nation.