



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

Committee: Health and Government Operations

Date: February 2, 2022

POSITION: Support

The Maryland Coalition of Families: Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) helps families who care for a loved one with behavioral health needs. Using personal experience, our staff provide one-to-one peer support and navigation services to family members with a child, youth or adult with a mental health, substance use or gambling issue.

MCF strongly supports HB 293.

The bill designates 988 to be the phone number for Maryland’s suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis hotline and establishes a sustainable funding source to support existing behavioral health crisis call centers in Maryland.

Congress designated 988 as the new phone number of 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 must designate 988 as the phone number for Maryland’s suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis hotline. Currently, far too many calls are going to law enforcement when families in crisis dial 911. The presence of law enforcement typically is not necessary, and can make the situation worse. It also takes away the valuable time of law enforcement officers.

In October 2021, MCF surveyed families of children under the age of 21 who had used crisis services for their child experiencing a behavioral health crisis. 173 parents/caregivers responded to the survey. The number one response of families with a child in crisis was to call 911. Sixty-three percent of the families surveyed called 911 when they felt in crisis. They did not call the hotline. They did not call a mobile crisis team. They called 911. In almost all of these cases the involvement of law enforcement was not necessary. In fact, a number of families noted that the presence of law enforcement made the situation

worse. Yet families are told by their child's therapists, psychiatrists, and other providers of services, "in the event of an emergency, dial 911."

As Maryland designates 988 as the behavioral health crisis hotline, the change will need to be accompanied by a major public relations campaign to encourage people to dial 988 in the event of a behavioral health crisis. Many families, who previously would have called 911, will be directed to dial 988. The volume of calls received by the call centers will dramatically increase, requiring additional funds.

Maryland has the unique opportunity to align with national efforts to improve access to crisis care by designating 988 as the number for our state's behavioral health crisis hotline and ensuring adequate funding to support local crisis call centers.

We urge a favorable report on HB 293.

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