

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

Health and Government Operations Committee

February 2, 2022

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 and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of House Bill 293. **This bill is a priority for the Maryland Behavioral Health Coalition.**

HB 293 establishes a fund to cover costs associated with designating and maintaining 9-8-8 as the universal telephone number for suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis response. This includes the costs related to developing and implementing a statewide continuum of behavioral health crisis response services.

Challenges in accessing quality mental health and substance use disorder services in the community results far too often in Marylanders calling police or going to hospital emergency departments when experiencing a behavioral health crisis. However, these options are rarely, if ever, the most appropriate or effective way of deescalating a crisis.

Behavioral health crisis response services, on the other hand, are developed and designed specifically to address the unique needs of individuals experiencing a mental health or substance use emergency. They provide services and supports necessary to stabilize the immediate crisis and linkages to community resources that can help maintain that stability. Unfortunately, many Marylanders don't know how best to access our crisis response network.

But that may soon change. 9-8-8 is the new easy-to-remember federally designated phone number for suicide prevention and crisis response. The number will go live in July, at which time all phone companies will route 9-8-8 calls to local crisis call centers.

Maryland has eight existing call centers. These resources provide free, confidential, 24/7 support and referrals to care for Marylanders in crisis. When 9-8-8 is active, and public awareness about the new number grows, there will likely be a significant increase in call volume. We must ensure our call centers have everything they need to effectively handle this influx of new calls.

For these reasons, MHAMD and the Maryland Behavioral Health Coalition support HB 293 and urge a favorable report.

For more information, please contact Dan Martin at (410) 978-8865