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January 31, 2022

To: **Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee**
Re: **HB 293– Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund**
Position: **FAVORABLE**

Chair Pendergrass and Honorable Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee,

The Baltimore City Council Suicide Prevention Legislative Workgroup is composed of providers, survivors, advocates, faith leaders, elected officials, nonprofit organizations, educators, community leaders, and researchers dedicated to decreasing barriers Baltimore City residents face to access efficient and effective mental health services to support their mental health, and prevent suicides from occurring within our city.

To this end, the Suicide Prevention Legislative Workgroup urges a favorable report on HB 293– Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund.

This 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 the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Beginning in July 2022, 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 free, confidential, emotional support to people calling for help, 24 hours a day. 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.

Since the start of the public health crisis, Maryland has experienced what experts refer to as a “dual pandemic” of suicide and COVID-19. From February 2020 to March 2020, there was a 45% increase in calls to the Maryland Helpline. In March 2020 there was an 842% increase in texts to the Maryland Helpline¹.

There are significant racial differences in statewide suicide mortality trends during the pandemic. Among Black Maryland residents, suicide mortality rate appeared to double between March 2020 and May 2020, compared to the rates in 2017 and 2019. In contrast, suicide mortality

¹ [COVID-19 and Suicide: A Crisis Within a Crisis | Hopkins Bloomberg Public Health Magazine \(jhsph.edu\)](https://www.hopkinsbloomberg.org/articles/2021/03/15/covid-19-and-suicide-a-crisis-within-a-crisis)

appeared almost halved among white residents during the same time². In Baltimore City, where approximately 60% of residents identify as Black, these disparities are cause for alarm and a call to action.

COVID-19 will have a long-term negative impact on mental health and suicide risk. It has never been more important for our state to designate and fund a well-resourced behavioral crisis hotline.

The Baltimore City Suicide Prevention Legislative Workgroup thus urges a favorable report on HB 293– Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund.

Sincerely,



Nick J. Mosby
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² [Racial Differences in Statewide Suicide Mortality Trends in Maryland During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Pandemic - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)