



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 293

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

House Health and Government Operations Committee
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Submitted by Julia Gross and Kali Schumitz, Co-Chairs

Member Agencies:

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Behavioral Health System Baltimore

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Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) strongly supports HB 293. This bill designates 9-8-8 as the suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis hotline for Maryland and establishes a needed funding source to support the Maryland's network of behavioral health crisis call centers.

Congress designated 9-8-8 as the new National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and directed states to prepare for a July 2022 to launch of the new number. This national system relies on a network of local crisis call centers to provide 24/7, free, supporting counseling for individuals experiencing a behavioral health or suicidal crisis. The call centers also connect individuals to other community supports, including mobile response teams for urgent needs and ongoing outpatient care. 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.

Access to services is especially important for Marylanders living in or near poverty. Financial difficulties cause strain any family. This stress builds up over time and can lead to feelings of overwhelm and other emotional distress. Limited resources are also related to challenges faced by children. Children living in deep poverty are five times more likely to experience abuse, neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences.¹ These experiences often lead to behavioral health crisis and effective crisis response is essential to helping children overcome these experiences. *Poverty both causes mental health challenges and is a result of mental health challenges.* Any effort to alleviate the burdens of poverty must include providing mental health supports to address the mental strain that poverty causes.

Supporting Maryland's network of local crisis call centers through effective implementation of the new 9-8-8 hotline will bring much needed behavioral health access and resources to low-income communities. Residents of low-income and rural communities have a harder time accessing traditional behavioral health services. Developing a new access point through 9-8-8 will help these communities get the support they need to be healthy and safe during a behavioral health crisis.

Low-income communities are not only under-resourced but are also overpoliced. This reliance on law enforcement to address behavioral health needs manifests in the criminalization of mental illness and poverty. Low-income individuals are far more likely to be incarcerated and Black residents make up 70% of Maryland's incarcerated population, the highest inequity in the nation.² At the same time, approximately 40% of adults in jail or prison have a diagnosed mental illness and seven out of ten youth in the juvenile justice system do.³ This interplay between racial inequities in the criminal justice system and the criminalization of mental illness bears out in use of force as well. One in four individuals killed by police officers have a known mental illness, and of those, one in three are people of color.⁴

Investing in 9-8-8 as an alternative to law enforcement intervention can help keep Marylanders living in or near poverty safe and ensure they get the support they need in a crisis. **MAP appreciates your consideration and urges the committee to issue a favorable report for HB 1.**

Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) is a coalition of service providers, faith communities, and advocacy organizations advancing statewide public policies and programs necessary to alleviate the burdens faced by Marylanders living in or near poverty, and to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/can/CAN-factsheet_2020.pdf

² Justice Policy Center: https://justicepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/Rethinking_Approaches_to_Over_Incarceration_MD.pdf

³ NAMI: Mental Health in Maryland Fact Sheet: <https://nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/StateFactSheets/MarylandStateFactSheet.pdf>

⁴ Washington Post Police Shootings Database: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>