



February 2, 2022

**House Health and Government Operations Committee  
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

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

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 78,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

**Behavioral Health System Baltimore strongly supports HB 293, Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services — 9-8-8 Trust Fund.** This bill will integrate the new national 9-8-8 suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis hotline into Maryland’s behavioral health crisis response system. By establishing the 9-8-8 Trust Fund and directing the state to coordinate with the federal government in promoting 9-8-8, this critical legislation will ensure Maryland is prepared when 9-8-8 launches in July 2022.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, and the local crisis call centers that make up its network, have been providing free, confidential, 24/7 supportive counseling and connection to community services for over twenty years. There are eight Maryland call centers in the Lifeline network, one of which is in Baltimore City. When 9-8-8 launches in July, callers will be linked to one of these local call centers. These community organizations provide essential services that are proven effective in preventing suicide and resolving other behavioral health crises by phone, text, and chat. They also connect callers to other crisis response interventions like mobile response teams and community-based outpatient services.

Congress took an important step in strengthening this network when it passed the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020. **This law designated a new, more easily remembered three-digit number for behavioral health and suicidal crises: 9-8-8.** This new number is a great step forward in helping people more easily access the support they need during a crisis, but it is only the first step. States must now act to prepare and properly fund the system.

If Maryland fails to prepare for the 9-8-8, residents struggling with mental health and substance use needs will continue to fall through the cracks. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Marylanders call 911 and/or go to hospital emergency rooms seeking care during a behavioral health or suicidal crisis. Baltimore City’s 911 call center receives over 13,000 behavioral health calls a year. Calm support, stability, and de-escalation are needed to resolve acute emotional distress and traditional law enforcement and emergency medical services are not designed for this. Individuals routinely wait many hours or days while hospitals triage life-threatening medical emergencies. Law enforcement can escalate the situation or lead to the arrest of the individual in crisis. This is not an effective use of our community resources and does not help individuals in crisis to resolve their distress.

Inadequate behavioral health crisis system capacity can have deadly consequences. Deaths from suicide have risen steadily over decades, with alarming trends showing a doubling of suicide deaths among

Black Maryland residents in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overdose deaths have skyrocketed, increasing four-fold over the last decade to almost three thousand deaths per year. The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the mental health needs of Marylanders more urgent. In Baltimore, we have seen a double of the calls to our Here2Help crisis call center and similar trends are seen across the state. Maryland communities have all been affected by the trauma, uncertainty, and isolation wrought by the pandemic, and this has hit young people especially hard. Anxiety, depression, and problematic behavior are more common than ever, while suicide remains the second leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24.

Addressing these current needs requires additional capacity and call volume is only going to grow with the launch of 9-8-8. Call centers received limited federal and state funding to support their participation in the Lifeline network. Many operate on shoestring budgets and may even rely on volunteers. The national push to promote 9-8-8 when it launches in July will drive more call volume than the system can handle without investment. A SAMHSA-funded analysis estimated Maryland needed \$10-17 million to support call center operations alone.

As a funder of behavioral health crisis services in Baltimore City, BHSB provides approximately \$1.8 million to support its 24/7 crisis call center, however this is not nearly enough. We have calls to the city crisis call center double since April 2020, when the COVID pandemic hit. This bill allocates \$10 million to the 9-8-8 Trust Fund, allowing the Behavioral Administration to use Trust Fund dollars to invest in 9-8-8 call centers as a system, addressing gaps in staff capacity, infrastructure, and other operational needs. The Trust Fund can accept resources from a variety of sources and will serve as a safe harbor for those resources to support the 9-8-8 network over time. The structure mirrors the 9-1-1 Trust Fund that has served that system so well and will ensure that 9-8-8 can be properly implemented in Maryland.

The launch of 9-8-8 is a once in a generation opportunity to strengthen our behavioral health system and reimagine how we respond to those experiencing a behavioral health crisis. The state must not let this opportunity pass by unrealized. **BHSB urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to pass HB 293 and establish the Maryland 9-8-8 Trust Fund.**

*For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142*