



February 7, 2023

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

*HB 271 - 9-8-8 Trust Fund – Funding*

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, crisis response, 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 HB271 9-8-8 Trust Fund – Funding.** This bill will invest an additional \$12 million into the 988 Trust Fund in FY2025. This funding is needed to ensure the Maryland 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline network can continue to increase capacity and strengthen 988 helpline services.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline launched nationwide in July of 2022, establishing the first universal three-digit phone number for suicidal and behavioral health crisis helpline services. The new number uses the existing Lifeline network of helpline providers, representing a transition from the previous ten-digit 1-800 number and not an entirely new service. Maryland’s 988 Lifeline network is made up of eight experienced community-based organizations that cover the entire state. They have been providing free, confidential, 24/7 supportive counseling and community resources for over twenty years and three providers now offer text and chat in addition to call services.

The transition to 988 is an exciting opportunity to raise the profile of Lifeline services and invest in these life-saving interventions. Maryland has taken several important steps to invest in its 988 Lifeline network and is well-positioned to continue strengthening services. Last year, the General Assembly allocated \$5 million to support the 988 Lifeline, representing the first time Lifeline providers received significant state funding. The Lifeline has been undervalued and underfunded for decades and these state dollars have proven invaluable in keeping up with demand. This body also passed [SB241](#), which established the 988 Trust Fund to provide longer-term funding and support. The legislation directed \$5.5 million to the 988 Trust Fund in FY24 and HB271 will build on this to provide an additional \$12 million to support the network through FY25.

This infusion of funding is critical to keep up with the anticipated increase in call volume. In Baltimore, calls to our Here2Help Lifeline doubled during the pandemic and call volume has only continued to increase. Across the state, Lifeline call volume was 50% higher in December 2022 than in December 2021, while chat and text increased four-fold. Overall, 2022 call, chat, and text volume was about 30% higher than 2021, with significant and ongoing increases starting in July with the transition to 988. The increase in demand is understandable, as Maryland communities have experienced significantly more mental health challenges. Everyone has been affected by the trauma, uncertainty, and isolation wrought by the pandemic, and this has hit young people especially hard. Marylanders need access to more mental health services today than ever before and the 988 Lifeline is helping to meet that need.

The increase in Lifeline call, chat, and text contacts is also in line with a 2021 SAMHSA-funded analysis of likely Maryland demand for services and required funding. This analysis found the state would need \$10-17 million in the first year to support adequate capacity in the 988 Lifeline network and increased funding in every subsequent year as familiarity with 988 increased. The \$12 million allocation in HB271 is likely a significant underestimation for FY25, the third full year after the 988 transition and two years after the \$10-17 million SAMHSA-funded estimate for the first year. This is especially true considering the rising business costs due to inflation and a shortage of behavioral health workers that was not anticipated in the 2021 analysis. The requested \$12 million will be put to good use and provide a safe harbor for the funds, allowing the state and its 988 Lifeline network the security to plan through the Summer of 2025.

Continued and increased investment in the Maryland 988 Lifeline network is needed, and it will provide valuable returns in strengthened services and saved lives. **BHSB urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to pass HB271 and further its investment in the Maryland 988 Trust Fund.**

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