

March 8, 2023

Re: 211 Founding Call Center Organization Concerns Regarding HB340 and HB1124 re: 211

Dear Committee Leaders and Members:

We, the founding call center organizations of the 211 Maryland System, have since the early 2000s worked to establish, build, and maintain a robust health and human service information and referral system for the betterment of Maryland. We are reaching out to express our concerns with respect to the 211 System, including issues we see with the leadership and management of the Maryland Information Network (MIN and dba 211 Maryland, Inc.), a nonprofit coordinating body for the 211 Maryland System and have grave concerns re: SB0890/HB340 and HB1124.

Ensuring that the people of Maryland are served well when they contact 211 has been our ‘true north’ since we began the development of 211 in 2000 – long before our four organizations co-created MIN in 2011 to serve as a ‘coordinating body’ for the 211 Maryland System.

It is our collective view that MIN is not serving the people of Maryland well. Its management is not working effectively with us, impeding operations, progress, the future direction of the 211 Maryland System and the information resource industry in Maryland as a whole. We have decades of experience and successful outcomes in building and running call centers, delivering on-the-ground 24/7/365 and shaping strategy and partnerships for the evolution of this industry.

We bring to your attention the following issues.

1) Transparency – There is a lack of transparency re: MIN’s strategic direction, plans and decisions that directly affect our organizations without our involvement in the process when we are the on-the-ground experts, providers, partners and fundraisers as well as thought leaders in the information industry space.

2) Communication - There is limited and, at times, an entire lack of communication re: meetings, services and operations as well as inappropriate communications based on the levels of employees that MIN is addressing. Communication from MIN is poor overall at best. Staff are hired and new initiatives started without our knowledge or any consultation about our ongoing lived experiences that would greatly benefit the definition of and hiring for the position or the initiative. This creates confusion for those in the community as well as funders and service providers. For example, MIN hired a Community Engagement Coordinator whose efforts appear to be duplicative of what our organizations already do, except for the fact that we are equipped with both the in-depth local and often statewide and national knowledge and relationships that make for effective partnership opportunities.

3) Troubleshooting/Customer Service – MIN is quick to listen to issues, but nothing gets resolved – even urgent matters such as the 211 website for which MIN is responsible. This is where many providers and community members may seek resources directly online. This affects

not only our ability to serve those who contact 211 as a lifeline when they need it most, but our reputation as well.

4) Payments - There is a continuing lack of timely payment for services that have been rendered by our staff members. The harsh reality is that the funding that each of our organizations receives from MIN through State of Maryland resources is a fraction of what it costs each of us to provide 211 services. While MIN is dipping its toes into the revenue generation space, its ability to fundraise is not a well-honed skill compared to what our organizations have done for decades in meeting budgetary requirements of each call center.

5) Meeting Management – There is poor meeting management at all levels - executive and operational - not only in terms of objectives and agendas, but also putting inappropriate groups of participants together – e.g., board members and our day-to-day operational staff. This disrupts progress and workflow at the very least.

6) 211 Resource Database Ownership - We believe that MIN is also violating the terms of a signed agreement (2012) which acknowledges that United Way of Central Maryland (UWCM) owns the resource database for 211 and that we all simply have the right to access it in the course of our daily work in exchange for helping to keep it current. MIN has informed us that they have built out that database - and have done so without UWCM's knowledge or permission - and intend to use it for FY2024 funding agreements which entail the use of a new centralized system.

We also have serious concerns about the quality of the information in the records of the database that MIN has been working on which could negatively affect people in Maryland, which would not only hurt those in need of services, but also damage the reputation of our organizations who have long been associated with 211. The 211 System is only as good as its database and those who operate it.

7) Restrictions on Building Effective Partnerships That Serve the People of Maryland - For two decades our four organizations have been the heart of the statewide cross-sector initiatives to build the 211 Maryland System, each contributing to the best of, and sometimes well beyond, our respective organizations' capacities from service, funding, advocacy, relationship building, training, marketing, and related standpoints. We were written into the Maryland law in 2010 that made 211 the primary number in Maryland for access to information about resources, and we were the ones who co-created MIN to serve as a coordinating body.

An invaluable part of building the credibility and utility of the 211 Maryland System has been leveraging the unique local - and often statewide and national - knowledge about issues, resources, and public, private, and nonprofit partners that each of our organizations possesses. This has resulted in partnerships, programs, and initiatives that enhanced 211 Maryland's value as a hub for information about and easier access to services. We have worked collaboratively to support these sometimes more local programs, presenting publicly as a '211 Maryland System' and thereby helping to elevate the entire system. MIN is now informing us that we cannot enter partnerships; that everything must be done through them when they often lack the knowledge, capacity, and relationships that we have and/or commit the system to programs without an awareness/understanding of what it takes to deliver on a given partnership. This results in poorly

managed programs that put the 211 Maryland System's overall reputation at risk. We are concerned about the downward spiral that this may create for the 211 Maryland System.

While MIN is exploring what it deems as evolutionary steps, its process in doing so, including the pursuit of HB340 and HB1124, is woefully lacking in engaging the very organizations that have decades of experience in what it takes to drive and achieve change. In our view, what MIN is attempting to do is beyond the scope of the Maryland statutory framework and contrary to the interest of the system as a whole.

We are not being treated as the true partners, experienced experts and founders of the 211 System that we are. These issues have led to fundamental concerns about stewardship of the 211 Maryland System. Our organizations want three things:

1. To be heard, valued and leveraged as the founders of the 211 Maryland System and co-creators of MIN, the vision for the future that we bring, boots-on-the ground experience and the unique skills and talents that we have, given our sizes; locations; and local, state, and national relationships that go far beyond the current state of MIN. A solution to these systemic issues must include representatives from the four local call center organizations, MIN, and various State of Maryland agencies to ensure a strong system of support for Marylanders.
2. To ensure that our interests are protected because we have a proven track record of service in good times and bad, including throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, ramping up an additional 80 call specialists in a matter of days to handle the enormous increase in call volume due to the pandemic. This point also includes the matter of database ownership by UWCM, and
3. To ensure that service to the people of Maryland is at the front and center of all decisions.

We urge you not to pass SB0890/HB340 or HB1124 at this time, but to engage us in the process moving forward to reach a more effective solution.

Sincerely,



Timothy R. Jansen
Chief Executive Officer
Community Crisis Services, Inc.
Hyattsville
Timj@ccsimd.org



Shannon Aleshire
Chief Executive Officer
Mental Health Association of Frederick County
Frederick
saleshire@fcmha.org



Jamie Manning, LCSW-C
Executive Director
Life Crisis Center
Salisbury
Jmanning@lifecrisiscenter.org



Franklyn Baker
President and Chief Executive Officer
The United Way of Central Maryland, Inc.
Baltimore
franklyn.baker@uwcm.org