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March 18, 2025

COMMITTEE: House Health and Government Operations Committee

BILL: SB 36 – Public Safety – 911 Trust Fund – 988 Suicide Prevention Hotline

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The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives.

The Foundation is pleased to support SB 36 – Public Safety – 911 Trust Fund – 988 Suicide Prevention Hotline. This bill would allow the 911 Trust Fund to better coordinate investments with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, including software and joint training. Current Maryland law restricts the 911 Trust Fund from being utilized for any costs related to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. This bill would remove that prohibition but still ensure that funding for each service remains focused on their own purpose.

911 and 988 provide related but distinct emergency response services. 911 aims to dispatch emergency response resources as quickly as possible; 988, on the other hand, provides emergency emotional support and can take the time that is necessary to help someone experiencing a behavioral health crisis. In addition, one of the goals of establishing 988 was to better connect individuals in a behavioral health crisis with behavioral health support and resources directly, rather than dispatching police in situations where that is not the appropriate response. By allowing the 911 Trust Fund to be used to fund efforts that will improve coordination between these two services, call centers can more efficiently transfer calls as appropriate and better connect Marylanders to the emergency services they need.

Like many communities across the country, mental and behavioral health needs in Howard County have been on the rise and barriers remain to ensuring robust and equitable access to care. According to our county's most recent health assessment survey of 1000 representative adult residents, more than a third reported that they had been "bothered by having little interest or pleasure in doing things" for several days or more over the previous two weeks.ⁱ This number has risen significantly since 2018. In the same survey, respondents under age 45, Black and Hispanic residents and those in households with incomes under \$50,000 per year were significantly more likely to report feeling down, depressed or hopeless. There is also growing

research that shows chronic stress and trauma due to racism exacerbates mental and behavioral health challenges for people of color.

These rates are startling and reflect larger systemic issues and the need for expanded mental health and behavioral health crisis services – including and beyond 988. Building a more efficient and well-coordinated emergency management system will help ensure that Marylanders get the support they need.

We strongly believe everyone should have access to compassionate health and mental health care. For this reason, the Foundation **SUPPORTS SB 36 and urges a FAVORABLE report.** Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱ Howard County Health Assessment Survey, 2024.