



**Testimony to SUPPORT SB 904
Larry Bram, Senior Vice President
Easterseals DC MD VA**

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman and members of the committee:

For the record, my name is Larry Bram and I am a Senior Vice President for Easterseals DC MD VA. For 100 years, Easterseals has been making profound, positive differences in the lives of people of all ages with disabilities, special needs, military backgrounds and their families. **We urge the committee to support Senate Bill 904 to establish the Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program to ensure that behavioral health providers who serve veterans and service members have adequate resources to provide these critical services.**

There is great need for behavioral health services among veterans, service members and their families in Maryland. There are approximately 399,000 veterans living in Maryland, of which an estimated 24,000 have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Across the state, approximately 10,000 veterans are dealing with post-traumatic stress or major depression. We know that veterans comprise 18% of all deaths by suicide in Maryland and this group is twice as likely as non-veterans to die by suicide. 12.4% of military suicides are by former National Guard and Reserve members who were never federally activated and therefore, not eligible for care by the VA.

We are honored that Sheila Hixson has allowed the bill to be named in her honor. As you know, her son was a Marine who, unfortunately, ended his own life. Delegate Hixson was a big supporter of this bill when it was first conceived.

We are all aware that the current capacity of government agencies cannot adequately address the behavioral health needs of our veterans and service members. Community providers—like Easterseals—help fill in the gaps in behavioral health services for veterans. And we are pleased that many organizations have joined to support the bill. A number have submitted letters of support or written testimony that is included in your packets. These organizations include a diverse variety of organizations, including NAMI; McVets, which helps homeless veterans in Baltimore, the Warrior Canine Connection, and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA).

While changing and saving lives is our primary mission, our early intervention and evidence-based treatment is helping to dramatically reduce the longer-term costs of care for veterans and

military families. According to a recent Rand study, the long-term costs for PTSD and major depression in Maryland veterans ranges from \$130-\$200 million. The study estimates that early intervention with evidence-based treatments could save Maryland \$35-\$53 million over two years. This is a fantastic return on investment.

SB 904 is modeled after a law enacted by the Texas Legislature in 2015 (SB55), which provides \$20 million per year for veteran behavioral health care. SB 904 requests the governor *may* fund the program up to an annual budget of \$2.5 million to fund community-based veteran behavioral healthcare in Maryland. In this difficult budget year, we are suggesting that you pass the legislation to create the program and we can continue to work to get it funded. All state funds will be leveraged one-to-one with additional private funds, providing up to \$5 million per year in much needed services. The impact of this support will be dramatic and will provide a modicum of financial stability for the many nonprofit organizations serving this population.

SB 904 is an important and highly cost-effective opportunity to honor the service of veterans and their families as they seek to reintegrate into society and contribute to their communities. **We urge the committee to submit a favorable report on SB 904 to change and save the lives of more veterans, their families, and the families of active duty service members in Maryland.**