

January 26, 2021

House Bill 209 - Public Health - Maryland Suicide Fatality Review Committee - SUPPORT

Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a statewide network of more than 45,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations and service providers. NAMI Maryland is dedicated to providing education, support and advocacy for persons with mental illnesses, their families and the wider community.

NAMI Maryland strongly supports HB 209, legislation that would create a statewide program to review suicide deaths and to develop strategies for suicide prevention. Timely data is needed to ensure local jurisdictions can take targeted action to prevent suicides. Unfortunately, we know the covid-19 pandemic has contributed to increased instances of mental illness and early intervention is key to preventing suicide.

Suicidal thoughts, much like mental health conditions, can affect anyone regardless of age, gender or background. In fact, suicide is often the result of an untreated mental health condition. Suicidal thoughts, although common, should not be considered normal and often indicate more serious issues.

Every year thousands of individuals die by suicide, leaving behind their friends and family members to navigate the tragedy of loss. In many cases, friends and families affected by a suicide loss (often called “suicide loss survivors”) are left in the dark. Too often the feelings of shame and stigma prevent them from talking openly. The goal of this bill is to bring appropriate information to light to help decision makers enact policies that prevent suicide.

Suicide is on the rise in several populations. According to a December, 2020 JAMA Psychiatry report, suicide mortality doubled for Black Marylanders. And, Suicide continues to be the second leading cause of death for children and young adults ages 10-24.

Early intervention saves lives. The pandemic has brought Maryland’s racial health disparities into sharp relief. Black individuals are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Increased suicide mortality in period 2, when deaths due to COVID-19 peaked and Maryland was locked down, reflects this difference. The unexpected decrease in suicides among White residents may be due to greater capacity for remote work or benefits from relief efforts. Children continue to be at risk the longer they are away from school, services, their peers and routines.

This legislation will help better direct our suicide prevention efforts – something we need more today now than ever.

For these reasons, NAMI Maryland asks for a favorable report on HB 209.

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