

**RE: SUPPORT of House Bill 442
(Suicide Treatment Improvements Act)**

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Susan M. Maskaleris

Board of Directors – Advocacy/Public Policy Chair

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Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Peña-Melnyk, and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

My name is Susan Maskaleris and I live in Waldorf, Maryland. I am the Advocacy/Public Policy Chair with the Maryland Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. I lost my father, a retired Air Force firefighter, to suicide when I was 14 years old. I also live with a mental health condition (chronic depression).

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony in support of House bill 442, the **Suicide Treatment Improvements Act**. Passage of HB 422 will help save lives across Maryland and AFSP-Maryland strongly supports the bill's provisions:

- Training for Health Crisis Hotline staff to ensure they can effectively provide general counseling as well as counseling for suicidal individuals in crisis.
- Requiring healthcare facilities to ensure that all clinical staff treat suicidal individuals with the same dignity as those with physical ailments, conduct themselves so as not to re-traumatize suicidal patients or patients who have attempted suicide, receive training in de-stigmatization of mental illnesses, and refrain from performing psychological tests on patients in crisis.
- Requiring state behavioral health facilities to (1) employ a sufficient number of individuals who are trained in counseling patients that are suicidal and/or have attempted suicide, who are available to provide one-on-one counseling and daily counseling to all patients in the facility, and who have the ability to provide assessment, immediate crisis counseling, and evaluation for individuals presenting with an emergent mental health crisis, and (2) to ensure patients have access to at least one counselor 24/7.
- Written after-care plans that take care to ensure that a patient is not discharged from a residential facility if the patient will be homeless or transferred to a correctional facility or detention center if the patient is not a danger to self or others.
- Prohibiting certain health benefit plans from applying copayments, deductibles, or coinsurance requirements to counseling and assessment services for suicidal individuals.
- Implementing standards to ensure that when responding to an incident involving a suicidal individual, police officers are accompanied by a trained counselor, do not use force or draw their weapons absent of a clear threat to others, and approach the individual in a gentle and respectful manner.

It is not only essential that gatekeepers such as crisis call center staff and first responders are trained to refer those at risk for suicide to professional services, but also that the clinical staff and counselors who provide those services are equipped to handle those referrals. Suicide-specific training enhances the level of care that people at risk for suicide receive while also increasing provider confidence, competence, and ability to provide effective, lifesaving treatment.

Removing the stigma around suicide and ensuring individuals at risk are treated with respect and compassion is a vital component in preventing suicide and increases the likelihood those individuals will seek and receive quality mental health care. Crisis service providers, clinical staff, and first responders who understand how to recognize and communicate safely and effectively with suicidal individuals can have more positive interactions with those who are struggling and at risk and connect them to appropriate services, resulting in better and safer outcomes for all involved.

Members of the Health and Government Operations committee, the AFSP Maryland Chapter is grateful for your consideration of HB 442 and for working with your colleagues and other agencies to address the suicide rate in Maryland. We all have a role to play in preventing suicide, and with your support, passage of this legislation will affirm the state's commitment to improving the lives of all Maryland citizens and to preventing the tragic loss of life to suicide in the future. We urge a favorable report on HB 442. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or if you would like additional information. Thank you.