

**RE: SUPPORT of Senate Bill 74
(Police Officers – Mental Health – Employee Assistance Programs)**

January 20, 2021

Susan M. Maskaleris

Board of Directors – Advocacy/Public Policy Chair

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Maryland Chapter (AFSP-MD)

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Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings 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 (AFSP-MD). 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 Senate bill 74 which requires each law enforcement agency to provide police officers confidential access to an employee assistance or mental health program to address the work related and/or personal mental health issues. The legislation also requires each agency to provide officers with a voluntary mental health consultation or counseling following certain incidents.

Suicide is a leading, preventable public health problem in our state. In 2018, we lost 650 Maryland residents to suicide, making it the 4th leading cause of death for ages 35-44, the 5th leading cause of death for ages 45-54 and the 9th leading cause of death for ages 55-64.

Research has highlighted the link between PTSD and suicide among first responders, and police officers are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty. In 2019, a record number 228 current or former officers died by suicide, (compared with 172 in 2018). By comparison, 132 police officers were killed in the line of duty in 2019.

Law enforcement officers often experience occupational hazards and stressors on the job, such as traumatic events and shift work, that can in turn increase risk for suicidal behavior or exacerbate existing risk for suicide related to other factors. In addition, police officers tend to work within a culture that discourages showing signs of weakness, which can contribute to a reluctance to seek help or self-disclose mental health concerns or suicidal thoughts.

We owe it to our law enforcement personnel to support a culture where it is a sign of strength to seek help and where police officers are supported in mental health just as they are in other aspects of health. Furthermore, law enforcement officers who understand how to recognize mental health issues can have more positive interactions with individuals who are struggling and connect them to appropriate services, leading to better outcomes for those at-risk.

Suicide can be prevented through early detection of officers who may be in crisis or struggling with their mental health and by connecting those officers and their families to resources and treatment services. I urge you to support SB 74 to ensure that all law enforcement officers have direct access to services and

programs to effectively address any mental health conditions, or personal or work-related stress and prevent officer suicide. There is no single cause of suicide, but by treating mental health conditions and empowering our law enforcement officers to live and thrive in their communities, we can save lives.

Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee, the AFSP Maryland Chapter is grateful for your consideration of SB 74 and for working with your colleagues and other agencies to address the suicide rate among our law enforcement community. 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 Maryland's police officers and their loved ones and to prevent the tragic loss of life to suicide in the future. We urge a favorable report on SB 74. Please feel free to contact me at smaskaleris@gmail.com or 301-751-8781 with any questions or if you would like additional information.

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