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February 8, 2022

COMMITTEE: Senate Finance Committee

BILL: SB 241 – Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund

POSITION: Support

The Horizon Foundation is Howard County’s community health foundation and the largest independent health philanthropy in the state of Maryland. We lead community change so everyone in Howard County can live a longer, better life.

The Foundation strongly supports SB 241—Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services—9-8-8 Trust Fund. This bill designates 988 to be the phone number for Maryland’s suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis hotline and establishes a sustainable funding source to support existing behavioral health crisis call centers in Maryland.

Congress designated 988 as the new phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. In July 2022, 988 will go live, and all phone companies will route 988 calls to local crisis call centers that are part of the Lifeline network. The local crisis call centers provide 24/7 free, confidential emotional support to people calling for help. It is expected that calls to the Lifeline will significantly increase when the new number goes live and Maryland needs to ensure that its existing eight local call centers are adequately resourced to support this influx of calls for help.

Significant gaps remain in making emergency crisis services for people with mental health needs more accessible. In Howard County, we continue to see stark racial disparities in mental health, especially among Black and Latino residents. In 2014-2016, suicide was the leading cause of death for youth ages 15-19 in Howard County.ⁱ Among these youth, young Latina women are most at risk of depression and planning a suicide. Nearly 50% of Latina high schoolers and 42% of multiracial female high school schoolers said they felt sad and hopeless in comparison to 23% of White students and 26% of Black students.ⁱⁱ Among adults, Black residents are most likely to say they have been “bothered” by “feeling down, depressed or hopeless” and by “having little interest or pleasure in doing things”, which are two indicators of risk for depression.ⁱⁱⁱ These rates are startling and reflect larger systemic issues and the need for expanded mental health and behavioral health crisis services, like 9-8-8.

While many gaps in our mental health and behavioral health crisis systems exist, Maryland has a unique opportunity to align with national efforts to improve crisis care. Establishing this number and ensuring adequate sustainable funding to support local crisis call centers is critical to meeting the needs of our community members and saving lives.

The Horizon Foundation urges the Senate Finance Committee to pass SB 241.

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- i. Howard County Health Department. (2018). Suicide Prevention, Howard County Youth. Retrieved from <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=6nrdbJIH7JI%3d&tabid=1390&portalid=0>
 - ii. Maryland Department of Health, Prevention and Health Promotion Administration. (2016). Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2016, Maryland High School Survey, p. 14. Retrieved from <https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/ccdpc/Reports/Documents/2016%20YRBS%20YTS%20Reports/2016HowardHS%20Summary%20Tables.pdf>. Note: The original source for these data (Maryland Department of Health’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey) breaks data down by the following categories: White, Black, Hispanic/ Latino, All Other Races and Multiple Races. This explains the lack of information on Asians in this segment of the report. We recognize this lack of differentiation is a common problem with public health statistics and underscores the need for more robust practices in disaggregating available data.
 - iii. OpinionWorks. (2018). 2018 Howard County Health Assessment Survey Data Tables. Unpublished data