

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 0699 – OFFICE OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER – GRIEF COUNSELING SERVICES

To Del. Lehman and members of the HEALTH AND GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE. I live and work in Baltimore City and I study risk for and prevention efforts related to suicide and overdose deaths at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. My testimony is related to this role, as well as my experiences living through suicide bereavement and working with patients who have experienced traumatic bereavement.

I support HOUSE BILL 0699 – OFFICE OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER – GRIEF COUNSELING SERVICES

Research shows that survivors of traumatic bereavement experience significant physical, mental health, financial, and school or work difficulties following the loss of loved ones. In 2018, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of Maryland attended to approximately 15,000 sudden deaths, including approximately 3,000 deaths by suicide or overdose. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing opioid epidemic, these numbers will likely increase in the coming years. It is unclear how many people are left behind following these losses, but research indicates that 135 people are affected by every suicide. A 2017 report indicated that 240,000 American children have lost a parent to overdose deaths and 325,000 have been placed into foster care because of their parents' opioid use disorders. Thus, it is likely that a large and growing proportion of Marylanders are coping with traumatic bereavement.

While everyone touched by traumatic bereavement is likely to struggle, some groups may be especially vulnerable. People who lose family members to suicide are at elevated risk for suicide. Youth exposed to suicide are especially vulnerable to developing more and more severe forms of suicidal thoughts and behaviors – a phenomenon known as “suicide contagion.” In 2015, almost 18% of Baltimore City High School students seriously thought of killing themselves or attempted suicide in the past 12 months. Children who lose loved ones are at elevated risk for mental health, substance use, and housing problems that increase risk for overdose deaths. Nationally, approximately 170,000 children have been accidentally poisoned by opioids or have developed an opioid use disorder.

Black Marylanders may be disproportionately affected by traumatic bereavement. Suicide deaths among Black Marylanders increased significantly during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and have remained elevated. In contrast, suicide deaths among White Marylanders sharply decreased during the first wave of the pandemic. These trends map onto national data which show that suicide rates are increasing among Black Americans while they decrease for White Americans. Notably, Black youth have experienced a rapid increase in suicidal thoughts and behaviors. In the past five years, suicide deaths have increased 30% and suicide attempts have increased 73% in Black youth. These data may indicate that Black Americans have experienced an increase in drivers of suicide (e.g., traumatic bereavement) and/or that suicide prevention efforts have not been accessible to or helpful for Black Americans.

We know that opioids have increased the rates of both overdose and suicide deaths. I believe that Opioid Restitution Funds could be used to break cycles of suicide and overdose risk and to create cycles of healing in bereaved families and communities. A bereavement hub at the Maryland Office of the Chief Medical Examiner could engage families in their darkest hour and connect them to community programs that support long-term healing. Similar programs have worked in New York City, Philadelphia, and New Mexico. In Maryland, the Office of the State's Attorney has created a successful bereavement program for survivors of homicides. Maryland could lead the way in creating a comprehensive, equitable hub for survivors that could engage those experiencing traumatic bereavement, support first responders, conduct bereavement research, extend educational resources for community bereavement providers, and mobilize crisis response in schools and other settings affected by traumatic losses.

I urge you to vote in favor of HOUSE BILL 0699. Thank you for your consideration.