



January 26, 2022

House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT
HB 48 – Public Health – Maryland Suicide Fatality Review Committee

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 78,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports HB 48 – Public Health – Maryland Suicide Fatality Review Committee. This bill would establish a state team to review suicide deaths and provide timely analysis and recommendations to make needed improvements to our state suicide prevention policies.

Suicide represents a serious public health challenge that has been increasing for the last two decades. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24 and other concerning trends have emerged in recent years. A sharp increase has been seen in suicide deaths among Black youth and suicide appears to have doubled among Black Maryland residents in the years prior to the pandemic. These alarming trends demand investigation and a systemic response.

Strengthening the systems that the state has in place to review suicide deaths can provide direction on how to prevent suicide. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant isolation and disruption for many residents but its impact on suicidal risk is not well understood. In Baltimore, BHSB has seen a doubling of the calls made to the city’s 24/7 Here2Help hotline and a huge spike in overdose deaths. The U.S. Surgeon General and several national groups have also declared a youth mental health emergency. The state should do more to understand these trends. Baltimore City recently established a new Suicide Prevention Coordinator role that will help, and similar state leadership will contribute to these efforts.

Suicide is preventable. Supportive counseling provided through the national suicide prevention network and local call centers is effective at reducing suicide risk. Community behavioral health services can help those struggling with suicidal thoughts and depression overcome these challenges and lead meaningful, rewarding lives. The forthcoming launch of a new national number for suicide prevention, 988, along with state investments in innovative projects like the Greater Baltimore Regional Integrated Crisis System (GBRICS) Regional Partnership will strengthen our suicide and crisis response systems, but the state needs further insights and policy changes to overcome the mental health crises of our time.

We need to identify innovative ways to prevent suicide and support those struggling with suicidal thoughts and depression. Establishing a state suicide review committee can help inform those efforts and ultimately save lives. **BHSB urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to support HB 48.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142