



February 23, 2022

**House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

HB 659 – Firearm Safety – Storage Requirements and Youth Suicide Prevention (Jaelynn’s Law)

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 strongly supports HB 659 – Firearm Safety – Storage Requirements and Youth Suicide Prevention (Jaelynn’s Law). This bill would update Maryland’s current child access prevention (CAP) laws for the first time in 20 years to reflect advancements in technology for safely storing guns and the need for public health education. These commonsense measures will help prevent youth suicide and other unintentional firearm-related injuries.

Death by suicide is on the rise and presents a critical public health challenge. Suicide deaths have increased by 30% in recent decades and is the second leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24. Many middle school and high school aged children seriously consider suicide and go on to make a suicide attempt. In the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, 23% of middle school students and 18% of high school students seriously considered suicide and 9% of middle school students reported a suicide attempt. Suicide impacts all age groups and racial/ethnic identities, but suicide risk for Black youth is particularly alarming. Black youth suicide is increasing at the fastest rate of any group and Black youth under 13 are now twice as likely to die by suicide than other racial/ethnic groups.¹

Access to firearms is a significant contributor to youth suicide risk. Adolescents and children in households with unlocked or loaded firearms are twice as likely to die of suicide.² About 2/3 of firearms are stored unlocked and 82% of youth who attempt suicide with a firearm obtained it from a parent or other family member in their household.³ This connection is even more concerning considering demand for firearms in Maryland has skyrocketed. According to the FBI National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), firearm background checks in Maryland have almost doubled since early March 2020 when compared to the previous five years.⁴

As the LBHA for Baltimore City, we believe our state must use every tool in our toolbox to reduce and reverse the increase in youth suicide risk. Commonsense improvements to our CAP laws will reduce youth access to unlocked and loaded firearms and help in the effort to reduce suicide. Addressing loopholes in our current CAP laws and implementing a public awareness campaign to drive behavior can save the lives of vulnerable young people. **We urge a favorable report on HB 659.**

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

Endnotes:

¹ Governor's Commission on Suicide Prevention. *Maryland's State Suicide Prevention Plan 2020*. Available at: <https://health.maryland.gov/bha/suicideprevention/Documents/2020%20Maryland%20State%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Plan.pdf>.

² Society for Research in Child Development. *Access to Firearms Increases Child and Adolescent Suicide*. Available at: <https://www.srcd.org/research/access-firearms-increases-child-and-adolescent-suicide>.

³ Harvard School of Public Health. *Means Matter Campaign*. Available at: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter>.

⁴ Governor's Commission on Suicide Prevention. *Maryland's State Suicide Prevention Plan 2020*. Available at: <https://health.maryland.gov/bha/suicideprevention/Documents/2020%20Maryland%20State%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Plan.pdf>.