



February 28, 2024

House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT

HB 933 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services—988 Trust Fund Fees

Community Crisis Services, inc. (CCSI) is a nonprofit organization serving individuals in need 24/7 in both the state of Maryland, and across the nation. CCSI operates as a 988 crisis center serving callers and chat visitors from southern Maryland, and is part of the 988 regional backup, Spanish, and video phone subnetworks. Through these subnetworks, CCSI provides backup coverage to other 988 centers in other parts of the nation, supports Spanish speakers, and supports individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. In partnership with Prince George's County 911 services, CCSI also answers calls diverted from 911 in which callers may be experiencing a mental health crisis but do not require immediate dispatch from emergency personnel.

Jamieson Brill, LMSW, Call Center Director of Community Crisis Services, inc., is pleased to support HB 933 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services—988 Trust Fund Fees. This bill establishes a permanent funding source for the 988 Trust Fund to sustain and strengthen 988 mental health helpline services in Maryland. Maryland established the 988 Trust Fund in 2022 to provide dedicated funding for 988, but no permanent funding source was established at that time. Instead, federal grants and state general revenue funds have supported Maryland's 988 launch. These state and federal funds run out next year. Maryland's 988 network needs a permanent funding source to address this fiscal cliff. HB 933 would create this permanent funding mechanism through a \$0.25 per month 988 telecom fee modeled after Maryland's current 911 funding structure. This would generate \$15-20 million annually to support current 988 operations, investments in new technology, and targeted service expansions. This dedicated funding is essential to meet increasingly strict federal 988 standards and ensure Marylanders can access 988 for lifesaving counseling and support when they need it.

The expansion of funding for 988 has enabled CCSI to expand its quality assurance team, hire purchase needed technology for staff use, raise staff wages and salaries, generate more full-time and fully-benefited positions for staff, and generate supervisory positions to oversee staff answering 988 calls and chats. These supervisory positions have helped create a web of ongoing support for staff members, and retention of staff has grown by 50% since 2022. However, one in ten Maryland calls to 988 are sent to the 988 backup subnetwork without getting picked up by a local 988 center, increasing the amount of time needed for these callers to have their call for help answered. Expectations from Vibrant Emotional Health and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration continue to become more stringent, requiring increasingly greater skill and efficiency from the 988 centers. Further dedicated, reliable funding is needed to boost staff numbers, retain staff, and continue training and supervisory efforts to instill the skill needed for all callers and chatters to 988 to receive the strongest support possible.

Jamieson Brill, LMSW, Call Center Director of Community Crisis Services, inc., urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to pass HB 933.