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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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HB 76 – PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICER - PERFORMANCE OF DUTIES - DEATH AND DISABILITY BENEFITS

SUPPORT

GOOD AFTERNOON CHAIR BARNES, VICE-CHAIR CHANG, AND ESTEEMED APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE MEMBERS. I AM ASKING YOUR FAVORABLE REPORT ON HB 76.

THIS BILL WILL PROVIDE DEATH AND DISABILITY BENEFITS FOR QUALIFYING MARYLAND PUBLIC SAFETY PERSONNEL WHO DIE BY SUICIDE OR ARE PERMANENTLY DISABLED DUE TO JOB-RELATED POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER OR OTHER MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS. IT IS MODELED AFTER A FEDERAL LAW THAT WAS PASSED BY CONGRESS AND SIGNED BY PRESIDENT BIDEN IN AUGUST 2022.

THE FEDERAL LAW WAS PASSED IN RESPONSE TO THE TRAUMA EXPERIENCED BY POLICE OFFICERS WHO DEFENDED THE U.S. CAPITOL DURING THE INSURRECTION ON JANUARY 6, 2021. FOUR OF THOSE OFFICERS SUBSEQUENTLY DIED BY SUICIDE.

HB 76 WILL AMEND THE MARYLAND PUBLIC SAFETY ARTICLE TO MAKE ITS DEATH AND DISABILITY BENEFITS FOR WORK-RELATED TRAUMA MATCH PROVISIONS IN THAT FEDERAL LAW.

THE BILL WOULD EXTEND DEATH AND DISABILITY BENEFITS TO PERSONNEL COVERED BY THIS LAW OR THEIR BENEFICIARIES IN THE CASE OF DEATH. COVERED PERSONNEL INCLUDE:

- LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS
- CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS
- VOLUNTEER OR CAREER FIREFIGHTERS AND RESCUE SQUAD MEMBERS
- PUBLIC SAFETY AVIATION EMPLOYEES
- HAZARDOUS MATERIAL RESPONSE TEAM EMPLOYEES, AND
- 911 CALL TAKERS.

THE ADDITION OF 911 DISPATCHERS IS THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE 2024 BILL AND THIS YEAR'S BILL. THE BILL ALSO COVERS A PERSON WHO SERVED IN THE AFGHANISTAN OR IRAQ WAR IF THE INDIVIDUAL WAS A MEMBER OF THE UNIFORMED SERVICES OF THE UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN: AFGHANISTAN OR CONTIGUOUS AIR SPACE, ON OR AFTER OCTOBER 24, 2001, AND BEFORE A TERMINAL DATE TO BE DETERMINED BY THE UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF DEFENSE; OR IRAQ OR CONTIGUOUS WATERS OR AIR SPACE, ON OR AFTER MARCH 19, 2003, AND BEFORE A TERMINAL DATE TO BE DETERMINED BY THE UNITED STATESH. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE.

FIRST RESPONDER STRESS

RESEARCH HAS FOUND THAT FIRST RESPONDERS ARE HIGHLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO A RANGE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROBLEMS INCLUDING SUICIDE, DEPRESSION, ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG ABUSE. ACCORDING TO A SEPTEMBER 9, 2022, ARTICLE IN PSYCHIATRIC TIMES, THOSE TRENDS HAVE CONTINUED TO INCREASE NEGATIVELY AMONG MEMBERS OF THOSE PROFESSIONS. IN AN APRIL 2021 STUDY BY THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL ENTITLED "SUICIDES AMONG FIRST RESPONDERS: A CALL TO ACTION," CDC CONFIRMED THAT OCCUPATIONAL STRESS IN FIRST RESPONDERS CAN BE ASSOCIATED WITH AN INCREASED RISK OF SERIOUS MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES INCLUDING HOPELESSNESS, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, PTSD, AND SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR INCLUDING SUICIDAL IDEATION AND ACTUAL ATTEMPTS.

AND ACCORDING TO A U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SUPPLEMENT IN THE "HELP FOR HEROES PROGRAM," 30 PERCENT OF FIRE FIGHTERS, POLICE OFFICERS AND EMS PROFESSIONALS DEVELOP BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CONDITIONS INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO DEPRESSION AND PTSD, COMPARED TO 20 PERCENT IN THE GENERAL POPULATION. IN A STUDY ABOUT SUICIDE, FIREFIGHTERS WERE REPORTED TO HAVE HIGHER ATTEMPT AND IDEATION RATES THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION. IN LAW ENFORCEMENT, ESTIMATES SUGGEST BETWEEN 125 AND 300 POLICE OFFICERS DIE BY SUICIDE EVERY YEAR.

THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS HAS ADDED TO THE SUFFERING OF TOO MANY PEOPLE FOR TOO LONG. FOR FIRST RESPONDERS AND OTHERS WHO KEEP US SAFE FROM HARM, IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO RECOGNIZE THAT IN ADDITION TO THE PHYSICAL RISKS THEY ARE EXPOSED TO, THEIR JOB-RELATED TRAUMA MAKES THEM HIGHLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HARM INCLUDING SELF HARM.

PLEASE VOTE TO EXTEND DISABILITY AND DEATH BENEFITS TO THESE MEN AND WOMEN IN MARYLAND AND PROVIDE THEM THE PROTECTION AND COVERAGE THEY AND THEIR SURVIVORS DESERVE.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION. I URGE A FAVORABLE REPORT ON HB 76.