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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

TESTIMONY OF SENATOR SHELLY HETTLEMAN
SB 599 BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CRISIS RESPONSE GRANT PROGRAM

I am pleased to introduce **SB 599 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Grant Program – Funding**. This legislation takes a critical step in ensuring that behavioral healthcare is protected in Maryland at all levels by securing dedicated funding to essential services.

Despite the critical need for behavioral health services, Maryland's current system is failing those in crisis. According to the Maryland Hospital Association, one in five Marylanders experiences mental health disorders and substance use disorders.¹ Unfortunately, the emergency room (ER) has become a primary point of contact for crises arising from these disorders, despite not being the ideal setting for such care. This is evident by the fact that, while overall ER visits decreased between 2019 and 2021, the proportion of visits driven by behavioral health needs increased.² In FY21, over 12% of ER visits were related to behavioral health, marking a 10.5% increase since FY13.¹ With Maryland holding the record for the longest ER wait times in the country, it is clear that expanded community-based care and mental health resources are essential in order for patients with urgent behavioral health needs to obtain crisis care outside of the hospital ER. SB 599 works to ensure that the work that has already been done in Maryland to expand these services continues.

In 2018, this legislative body took the essential steps to enhance and expand crisis response systems across the state of Maryland by establishing the Behavioral Health Crisis Response Grant Program. Its primary goal is to provide funding to local jurisdictions as a means to develop and improve services such as mobile crisis teams, crisis walk-in centers, and crisis stabilization facilities. Since then, we have seen positive strides, but the demand for services continues to grow, making it clear that we must continue investing in community-based care. Additionally, the proposed \$116 million budget cut for behavioral health funding in the Governor's FY26 budget underscores that the need for sustained funding is more urgent than ever.

SB 599 requires the Governor to include in the annual budget bill for each of fiscal years 2027 through 2029 an appropriation of \$5,000,000 to the Behavioral Health Crisis Response Grant Program. This effort to guarantee consistent funding for the Grant Program reinforces the state's commitment to effective behavioral health crisis intervention and support, strengthens behavioral health infrastructure, and works to improve equity in behavioral health access. The programs that this fund supports are vital to addressing mental health crises before they escalate into emergency room visits or law enforcement encounters. Furthermore, these programs save lives.

Without guaranteed funding, Maryland risks backsliding on the progress we've made in improving behavioral health services, leaving countless individuals in crisis with nowhere to turn. Therefore, I urge a favorable report on SB 599.

- 1- <https://mhaonline.org/caring-for-communities/quality-safety/behavioral-health/>
<https://mhaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/maryland-general-assembly-hospital-throughput-work-group-final-report-march-2024.pdf>