



February 11, 2025

COMMITTEE: House Health and Government Operations Committee
BILL: HB 421 – Public Safety – 911 Trust Fund – 988 Suicide Prevention Hotline
POSITION: Support

The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives.

The Foundation is pleased to support HB 421 – Public Safety – 911 Trust Fund – 988 Suicide Prevention Hotline. This bill would allow the 911 Trust Fund to better coordinate investments with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, including software and joint training. Current Maryland law restricts the 911 Trust Fund from being utilized for any costs related to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. This bill would remove that prohibition but still ensure that funding for each service remains focused on their own purpose.

911 and 988 provide related but distinct emergency response services. 911 aims to dispatch emergency response resources as quickly as possible; 988, on the other hand, provides emergency emotional support and can take the time that is necessary to help someone experiencing a behavioral health crisis. In addition, one of the goals of establishing 988 was to better connect individuals in a behavioral health crisis with behavioral health support and resources directly, rather than dispatching police in situations where that is not the appropriate response. By allowing the 911 Trust Fund to be used to fund efforts that will improve coordination between these two services, call centers can more efficiently transfer calls as appropriate and better connect Marylanders to the emergency services they need.

Like many communities across the country, mental and behavioral health needs in Howard County have been on the rise and barriers remain to ensuring robust and equitable access to care. In our county’s most recent health assessment, the number of residents who reported experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety jumped significantly compared to the last survey in 2018, and only 16% reported receiving some type of treatment.ⁱ We also continue to see stark racial disparities in mental health. In the same survey, Black and Hispanic residents were much more likely than their White counterparts to report feeling a lack of interest or pleasure in doing things – as were residents with low income – in addition to feelings of being

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down, depressed or hopeless. There is also growing research that shows chronic stress and trauma due to racism exacerbates mental and behavioral health challenges for people of color.

These rates are startling and reflect larger systemic issues and the need for expanded mental health and behavioral health crisis services – including and beyond 988. Building a more efficient and well-coordinated emergency management system will help ensure that Marylanders get the support they need.

We strongly believe everyone should have access to compassionate health and mental health care. For this reason, the Foundation **SUPPORTS HB 421 and urges a FAVORABLE report.** Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱ Howard County Health Assessment Survey, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.hclhic.org/community/data>