

RE: SUPPORT of Senate Bill 164
(Veterans - Behavioral Health Services - Mental Health First Aid)

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Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and Members of Finance Committee:

My name is Susan Maskaleris and I live in Waldorf, Maryland. I am the Advocacy/Public Policy Chair with the Maryland Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP-MD). I lost my father, a retired Air Force firefighter, to suicide when I was 14 years old. I am a former U.S. Army officer, and my husband is a retired Army officer with 22 years active service. I live with a mental health condition, depression, and my husband lives with anxiety and depression.

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony in support of Senate bill 164 **Mental Health First Aid Training for Veterans** which requires Mental Health First Aid to be included in the veteran behavioral health services coordinated by the Department of Health and to include training for veterans and their families on how to identify and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use disorders; requires related reports to the Department and Governor on the number of Veterans and family members who take the course.

Maryland is home to approximately 385,000 veterans, 30,000 active-duty service members and 18,000 reservists/national guard members. In addition, there are 130,000 veteran households with children and another 60,000 reserve/national guard/active-duty dependents. According to the MDVA 2019 Annual Report, only about 40% of Maryland veterans are enrolled in the VA healthcare system. The Maryland veteran suicide rate is 17% and hovers almost 4% higher than the total rate of 13% (per 100,000 population). There is no single cause of veteran and military suicide, but by treating and preventing mental health and substance use conditions, limiting access to lethal means, and empowering veterans to live and thrive in their communities, we can save lives.

Mental Health First Aid is a course that gives people the skills to identify and assist an individual who may be developing a mental health problem or showing signs of a mental health crisis. The evidence behind the program demonstrates that it does build mental health literacy, helping the public identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness. Just as CPR training helps a person with no clinical training assist an individual following a heart attack, Mental Health First Aid training helps a person assist someone experiencing a mental health crisis and who may be contemplating suicide. In both situations, the goal is to help support an individual until appropriate professional help arrives. Participants of Mental Health First Aid training learn a single 5-step action plan known as ALGEE, which

includes assessing risk, respectfully listening to and supporting the individual in crisis, and identifying appropriate professional help and other support. Participants are also introduced to risk factors and warning signs for mental health or substance use problems, engage in experiential activities that build understanding of the impact of illness on individuals and families, and learn about evidence-supported treatment and self-help strategies.

Veterans often experience occupational hazards and stressors on the job, such as traumatic events during deployment that can in turn increase risk for suicidal behavior or exacerbate existing risk for suicide related to other factors. In addition, the military culture is one that discourages showing signs of weakness, which can contribute to a reluctance to seek help or self-disclose mental health concerns or suicidal thoughts.

We owe it to our veterans to support a culture where it is a sign of strength to seek help and where veterans are supported in mental health just as they are in other aspects of health. Furthermore, veterans who understand how to recognize mental health issues can have more positive interactions with their families and with peers who may be struggling and connect them to appropriate services, leading to better outcomes for those at-risk.

Suicide can be prevented through early detection of veterans who may be in crisis or struggling with their mental health and by connecting those veterans and their families to resources and treatment services. I urge you to support SB 164 to ensure that veterans and their families have direct access to services and programs to effectively address any mental health conditions, or personal or work-related stress and prevent veteran suicide.

Members of the Finance Committee, the AFSP Maryland Chapter is grateful for your consideration of SB 164 and for working with your colleagues and other agencies to address the suicide rate among our military and veteran community. We all have a role to play in preventing suicide, and with your support, passage of this legislation will affirm the state's commitment to improving the lives of Maryland's veterans and their loved ones and to prevent the tragic loss of life to suicide in the future. We urge a favorable report on SB 164. Please feel free to contact me at smaskaleris@gmail.com or 301-751-8781 with any questions or if you would like additional information.

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