

PAMELA G. BEIDLE
Legislative District 32
Anne Arundel County

Finance Committee

Vice Chair
Executive Nominations Committee



James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street, Room 202
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3593 · 301-858-3593
800-492-7122 Ext. 3593
Pamela.Beidle@senate.state.md.us

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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SB 550

**SHEILA E. HIXSON BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES MATCHING GRANT PROGRAM
FOR SERVICE MEMBERS AND VETERANS – ESTABLISHMENT**

Chairman Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee;

Thank you for the opportunity to present [SB550](#), Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program for Service Members and Veterans and Veterans – Establishment.

Senate Bill 550 would create a matching grant program for community based behavioral health clinics that serve veterans, active service members and their families. The program would be named after our former colleague Delegate Sheila Hixson who tragically lost her son (a Marine for 27 years) to suicide several years ago.

Only nonprofit organizations that serve service members, veterans and their families would be eligible for grants. The program would be administered by the Department of Health, which would develop the application procedures and the selection criteria for evaluating proposals. All grants would be required to be matched by the nonprofit organization. The bill allows – but does not mandate – state funding of up to \$2.5 million a year towards the program. The bill is modeled after a program in Texas that has been very successful in supporting programs that serve the behavioral health needs of active service members and veterans in that state.

We have nearly 400,000 veterans in Maryland, many of whom were deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and many of whom are living with PTSD or major depression. The statistics about veteran suicide in Maryland are grim:

- 18% of all suicides in Maryland are veterans and veterans are twice as likely to commit suicide as the general public
- 1/8th of veteran suicides are by Guards/Reserves who were not activated and therefore, not eligible for VA services
- 62% of veterans who take their own life are not under the care of the VA at the time of their death
- As you will hear from the witnesses that follow, COVID has made the problem even more pressing, with suicide ideation 30% higher among the clients of one clinic as compared to before COVID
- These statistics highlight the need for support for community-based behavioral health to fill the gaps in VA services through the passage of SB 550.

Thank you for your consideration of SB 550 and I urge the committee to move this bill with a favorable report.