



## **Statement of Maryland Rural Health Association**

To the Finance Committee

January 26, 2021

Senate Bill 164 Veterans – Behavioral Health Services – Mental Health First Aid

### **POSITION: SUPPORT**

Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, Senator Simonaire, and members of the Finance Committee, the Maryland Rural Health Association (MRHA) is in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 164 Veterans – Behavioral Health Services – Mental Health First Aid.

MRHA supports this legislation that requires mental health first aid training for veterans and immediate family members of veterans on how to respond to signs of mental illness and substance abuse disorders. This legislation would also require the Maryland Department of Health to make available behavioral health services to veterans that were not previously available, and provides timely coordination of these services. This legislation is in line with MRHA’s mission to educating and advocating for the optimal health and wellness of rural communities and their residents. It is most important now during the COVID-19 pandemic to prioritize the expansion and accessibility of behavioral health services, especially for vulnerable populations such as veterans in rural areas and beyond.

Rural Maryland represents almost 80 percent of Maryland’s land area and 25% of its population. Of Maryland’s 24 counties, 18 are considered rural by the state, and with a population of over 1.6 million they differ greatly from the urban areas in the state.

Maryland law states that “many rural communities in the State face a host of difficult challenges relating to persistent unemployment, poverty, changing technological and economic conditions, an aging population and an out-migration of youth, inadequate access to quality housing, health care and other services, and deteriorating or inadequate transportation, communications, sanitations, and economic development infrastructure.” (West’s Annotated Code of Maryland, State Finance and Procurement § 2-207.8b)

MHRA believes this legislation is important to support our rural communities and we thank you for your consideration.

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