



200 St. Paul Place, #2510 | Baltimore, MD 21202
1-866-542-8163 | Fax: 410-895-0269 | TTY: 1-877-434-7598
aarp.org/md | mdaarp@aarp.org | twitter: @aarpmaryland
facebook.com/aarpmd

**SB 164 Veterans - Behavioral Health Services - Mental Health First Aid
FAVORABLE
House Health and Government Operations Committee
March 23, 2021**

Good Afternoon Chairwoman Pendergrass and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee. I am Tammy Bresnahan, Director of Advocacy for AARP MD. As you know, AARP Maryland is one of the largest membership-based organizations in Maryland, encompassing almost 850,000 members **and more than 200,000 veterans.**

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, nationwide organization that helps people turn their goals and dreams into real possibilities, strengthens communities and fights for the issues that matter most to families such as healthcare, employment and income security, retirement planning, affordable utilities and protection from financial abuse.

SB 164 requires behavioral health services for which the Maryland Department of Health provides service coordination for veterans including mental health first aid and requiring that mental health first aid consist of training for veterans and the immediate family of veterans on how to identify and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use disorder. HB 164 also requires a report be sent to the Governor. We thank Senator Simonaire for being a champion to Maryland Veterans.

This initiative is particularly important as it focuses identifying and coordinating and training for veterans and their families. There are clear links between Post Traumatic Stress Injury, pain management leading to opioid addiction, and Veteran's suicide.

The most Veteran's suicide statistics are disturbing. In August 2016, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs released its landmark report on Veteran suicide. Their analysis reviewed millions of Veterans' records from 1979 to 2014 from every state in the nation. The results, updated in 2018, noted:

- About 20 Veterans a day nationwide commit suicide;
- Of those, about 14 will have had little or no contact with VA Health services; and
- 982 Maryland Veterans committed suicide between 2005 and 2016.

There is a common misperception that the Department of Veterans Affairs' services are adequate to address this dire situation. Nothing could be further from reality! Nationally, only about half of our twenty million Veterans are eligible receive VA health care.

Real Possibilities

In Maryland, only about 22% of 380,000 Veterans receive care through the VA. Not to mention that Veterans family members are not eligible for VA care. **Clearly, there is still a sizeable population at risk.**

In contrast with a “government only” approach, nonprofit organizations, in partnership with the government, offer the agility to rapidly identify and respond to the immediate needs of the populations served. They also offer Maryland significant cost-savings as the participating nonprofit organizations will need to not only develop effective programs with meaningful metrics, they will have to raise their portion of the funds match. Nonprofits, with their extensive utilization of volunteer support, deliver high-value services at low cost. We urge you to favorably consider this approach.

Speaking from personal experience, and as a sister of decorated combat Vietnam Veteran with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, being able to understand and identify underlying issues is imperative to seeking treatment. My brother Michael received three purple hearts and bronze star. He went to Vietnam at age 19 and never came back the same. My I only wish, more attention should have been given to suffering veterans when they come home. He died in 2007, hit by a car while walking on November 11th. He never received the help he needed. Let’s make sure our Vets are taken care of emotionally, mentally, and financially—it’s the least we can do.

AARP Maryland respectfully requests a favorable report for Senate Bill 164.

For questions or additional information, please feel free to contact Tammy Bresnahan, Director of Advocacy at tbresnahan@aarps.org or by calling 410-302-8451.