

BONNIE CULLISON  
Legislative District 19  
Montgomery County

Health and Government  
Operations Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates  
6 Bladen Street, Room 312  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401  
410-841-3883 · 301-858-3883  
800-492-7122 Ext. 3883  
Fax 410-841-3882 · 301-858-3882  
Bonnie.Cullison@house.state.md.us

Chair, Insurance and Pharmaceuticals  
Subcommittee

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of HB 812**  
**Maryland Department of Health – 2-1-1 Maryland**  
**– Mental Health Services Phone Call Program**

Good afternoon, Chairman Pendergrass, Vice Chairman Peña-Melnyk and honorable members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to present HB 812, **Maryland Department of Health – 2-1-1 Maryland – Mental Health Services Phone Call Program**. This bill seeks to add to the resources and services designed to address the on-going and increasing needs for mental health services for

In the last year, I personally know two people whose lives are forever changed and whose grief is unfathomable as the result of a family member having taken their own life. A loss like that is one of the most difficult challenges a person can face. We all grieve terribly when we lose someone in an accident, due to a somatic illness or a natural cause. But losing someone to suicide is different—the survivor is often left wondering what they could have done to help their loved one before it was too late. Of course, there is no easy answer to this question and ultimately it was the person's personal decision. But there is always the wondering.

In this committee we are asked every year to think about what **we can do**—what policies and programs we can put in place to make sure that the resources and programs are available for individuals who are suffering from mental health and substance abuse disorders. And we have answered that call in several different ways. For example, there are a number of State sponsored crisis hotlines—including 2-1-1 press 1. In that program, 2-1-1 Maryland partners with the state's Behavior Health Administration (BHA), MDMindHealth and MDSaludMental to provide supportive texts and mental health resource information. To benefit from these services, an individual contacts 2-1-1 Maryland by phone, text or internet. With this bill, we are going a step further and we are asking you to support another program—one that we believe will proactively support an individual who is struggling so they do not reach that crisis point.

While mental health issues have existed throughout history, it has only been in recent decades that it has been acknowledged and treated as a legitimate health care issue. In the 211 Maryland Annual Report 2020, over 64,000 Marylanders were provided with connections and information about where to get mental health services; an additional 52,000 responses related specifically for folks in suicide crisis or emotional distress. In FY 13, that number was just over 7,000. The pandemic has certainly contributed to the increase in FY 20, but the annual increase over FY19 was less than 10,000. Marylanders seeking help for mental health issues was significant before COVID-19.

Depression can affect everyone, at any age. In a September 2020 article in the Baltimore Sun<sup>1</sup> reported about how during the pandemic the elderly have been affected by the inability to visit in-person with their family members, especially children and grandchildren. The economic challenges are overwhelming for many and may lead to a crisis situation and considerations of suicide. In general, the suicide rate in the country has increased by 35% over the last 20 years. We have put programs in place, but the need is still overwhelming.

So what else can we do? Several years ago, we passed the Senior Call in program where any senior who registers can receive a daily automated call. If they do not answer the call, the previously identified person receives a call and there is follow up. What we are proposing with this bill is a similar concept, but involves only live people.

This bill would create a program, run by 2-1-1 Maryland, in which a person would actively sign up to receive a regular call from a person who is certified in Suicidology just to check it. If the individual is managing and is not expressing concerns or presenting with any of the warning signs of crisis, then it is just a friendly call. If the person is in crisis, they will be supported by the professionals at the call center immediately. Subsequently, they will work with the individual to create a plan of action and identify and provide access to on-going supports. This program respects the individual's self-determination and supports them in being pro-active in addressing mental health issues.

I have spoken to you over the years about what a tremendous resource 2-1-1 Maryland is—and this is just more evidence of their willingness to step up on behalf of our residents throughout the state. I want to thank the Executive Director, Quinton Askew, for his work with Senator Zucker and myself to make this program available.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this bill and on behalf of all Marylander who seek mental health services, I respectfully request a favorable report.

---

1

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/features/bs-hs-mental-health-covid-20200929-yzjfdfc2ijb4vab7o3v4g7q25a-story.html>