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ORAL TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF

SB 241 - Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services - 9-8-8 Trust Fund
Finance Committee - Senate - February 8, 2022

Thank you Chair Kelly, Vice Chair Feldman, and committee members for the time, work, and care that you have put into improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services for Marylanders of all ages.

My name is Denise Camp, I am a person who lives with a behavioral health issue, and I am here today representing On Our Own of Maryland, a statewide behavioral health (BH) peer education and advocacy organization. Our network of 20+ affiliated peer-run Wellness & Recovery Centers located throughout the state offer voluntary recovery support services, free of charge, to community members with BH challenges. **We strongly support Senate Bill 241, which provides necessary funding to make 988 the more effective, less traumatizing alternative to dialing 911 for behavioral health crises.**

Crisis response is a crucial part of behavioral healthcare, especially now, when so many people are experiencing new or worsening mental health symptoms. Our system needs the proper resources and infrastructure to ensure the right crisis response services are deployed in a timely and trauma-informed manner. This bill will ensure 988-answering call centers and related services have the staff, training, technology, and resources to quickly connect people in crisis with the right type and level of care: de-escalation, connection to walk-in services, mobile crisis response teams, or emergency support. When crisis calls are not appropriately understood and triaged, the response to a crisis can have the opposite of the intended effect.

Please let me share a story of a person in our network who, on two occasions, had behavioral health crises that ended in trauma, hospitalizations, and unexpected expenses that could have been avoided if 988 had been an option.

In the first incident, the person knew they were not well, and so took themselves to the Emergency Room. There, they were forcibly medicated, lost personal possessions, missed days of work from being hospitalized, and incurred medical bills totalling more than \$2,000. If calling 988 had been an option, the person could have spoken to trained staff with the ability to help them find timely outpatient services, or deploy a mobile response team for onsite support.

In the second incident, the person was in a public setting. Their loud speaking indicated to bystanders that they were not well, but they were not a danger to themselves or others - there was no aggressive behavior or weapon. The receptionist at the location called 911. When the police arrived, they handcuffed the individual, threw them to the ground, and put them on a stretcher to go to the hospital. It was a frightening and humiliating experience that again resulted in forced treatment, medical bills, and expenditures of unnecessary resources for the situation.

And, though it wasn't true in this case, people often do not get connection to community-based recovery services. If 988 had been available as an option, the response would have been a Mobile Response Team of trained clinicians and peers, or perhaps Crisis Intervention Team police officers who had specialized training in behavioral health crisis de-escalation. Either of these teams could have helped the person access treatment voluntarily, or in a less traumatizing way.

Crisis response is a safety net for people who are in a debilitating state of mind. Unfortunately, because our current system too often defaults to police as the first responders, many people who have been through a crisis (or known someone who has) have seen too much evidence that they will not be respected, supported, or safe if they reach out for help through 911. People are suffering in fear instead of seeking the crisis response services they need and deserve.

On Our Own of Maryland strongly urges you to support SB 241's critical investment in our crisis response system, to make sure all Marylanders receive quality, effective, respectful, and real-time support when seeking help in their most vulnerable and difficult times. Thank you.