

February 4, 2022

Senate Bill 241 – Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services 9-8-8 Trust Fund - SUPPORT

Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a statewide network of more than 45,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland provides education, support and advocacy for persons with mental illnesses, their families and the wider community.

Mental health crises and suicides can be devastating for individuals, families, and communities. When someone experiences a mental health crisis and doesn't receive the care they need, they can end up in emergency rooms, on the streets, involved in the criminal justice system, or in the worst case, they could lose their life. A 'round the clock crisis hotline can be the first line of defense in preventing these tragedies and an essential part of any continuum of care for mental health crises.

SB 241 designates 988 to be the phone number for Maryland's suicide prevention and behavioral health crisis hotline and establishes a sustainable funding source to support existing behavioral health crisis call centers in Maryland.

When it comes to mental health crises, one call can save a life, which is why we need to make that call as quick and simple as possible. Just as 9-1-1 is universally known for use during emergencies, like a heart attack or car accident, we need 9-8-8 for people experiencing a mental health crisis.

When people in crisis do not receive a mental health response, we see tragic outcomes. They may engage with law enforcement rather than mental health professionals, go to an emergency room where they wait hours — or even days — to get mental health care, or lose their lives to suicide because help wasn't fast enough. We need to ensure that everyone who experiences a mental health crisis, no matter where they live, receives a mental health response. To achieve that, we need an easy-to-access crisis response system that is a core part of our national strategy for mental health care and suicide prevention.

The creation of 9-8-8 is the gateway to any crisis system and is a core service that should be available in every community. NAMI Maryland strongly supports this legislation which will ensure this 3-digit crisis hotline is set up for future funding so that no Marylander goes without help if they need it.

Simplifying access and increasing resources is just one part of supporting people in crisis. To ensure that people can be connected to the care they need when they dial 9-8-8, we need to create a readily accessible crisis response system. NAMI Maryland looks forward to partnering with this committee, the state, and the wider behavioral health advocacy community to make this a reality.

For these reasons, NAMI Maryland asks for a favorable report on **SB 241**.