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HB 293 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund
FAVORABLE
House Health and Government Operations Committee
February 2, 2022

Good afternoon, Chairman Pendergrass and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee. I am Lois Meszaros, Ph.D. AARP member, and resident of Anne Arundel County. As you may know, AARP Maryland is one of the largest membership-based organizations in the Free State, encompassing almost 850,000 members. **AARP MD supports HB 293 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund.** We thank Delegates K. Young, Belcastro, Charkoudian, Forbes, Healey, Kaiser, Kerr, McComas, Reznik, and Ruth for co-sponsoring this legislation.

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.

HB 293 requires the Maryland Department of Health to designate 9–8–8 as the primary phone number for the State’s behavioral health crisis hotline to provide crisis intervention services and crisis care coordination to individuals accessing suicide prevention and behavioral health services. It would ensure that these services are available in any jurisdiction within the State 24 hours a day, 7 days a week according to the federal National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020. The bill would also establish a special non-lapsing 9-8-8 Trust Fund to be held by the State Treasurer and accounted by the Comptroller.

This behavioral health crisis hotline and Trust Fund are critical to helping those in need of immediate intervention to quickly connect with the professional support they need. In 2021, the Federal Communications Commission responded to the growing suicide epidemic across the U.S. by requiring all phone service providers to route calls made to 988 to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline crisis center by July 16, 2022. At that time, the current traditional-length number, 800-273-8255 (TALK), will be nationally shortened to the three-digit number like the emergency number, 911.

The Federal Communications Commission reported from 1999 through 2018, suicide rates were highest for women ages 45 to 64 and for men 75 and older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than 20 veterans die by suicide every day, and between 2008 and 2016, there were more than 6,000 veteran suicides each year. In 2017, suicide was the 10th-leading cause of death nationwide; 47,173 people took their own lives that year, according to a

CDC report. In 2016, the suicide rate was 1.5 times greater for veterans than for other adults, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

During the current pandemic older adults are experiencing and expressing feelings of extreme isolation and depression. Many of them have lost their spouse and are living alone. Relatives and friends are afraid to visit due to the fear of bringing Covid to their elderly relative who is less likely to survive the virus than someone younger. Their main systems of supports such as senior centers and places of worship are closed and unavailable or have gone virtual. Many older adults do not have the technical equipment or knowledge needed to use the virtual supports that are available, further increasing their feelings of isolation. Older adults miss the hugs from their grandchildren, the greetings, and handshakes from friends at places of worship and the lunches at the senior center. They are suffering from the lack of human contact and socialization. Older adults fear that things will never return to the way they were but will continue to be virtual which will continue to isolate them. They seem to be grieving the past and the losses they are experiencing. They want to participate in social activities with people not virtually, they want to go to stores and not have food and other items delivered by Amazon and they want to return to places of worship and sit in the pews and see their religious leader. They also fear getting Covid and having residual effects or dying. Such unmet needs and fears lead to depression and suicidal thoughts.

There is a need to expand the behavioral health crisis response services available to older adults. Designating and maintaining 9-8-8 as the universal telephone number for a National Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Hotline is important. Remembering a three-digit 988 number is easier than a 7- digit number. Establishing call centers to route the calls and respond with appropriate resources will assist older adults to get the supports they need in a crisis. Having a mobile crisis unit come to older adults is more viable than finding transportation to an emergency room or calling 911 and having law enforcement respond. Establishing stabilization centers will help older adults receive behavioral health services in a safe and comfortable environment, 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

For these reasons AARP Maryland supports HB 293 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services 9-8-8 Trust Fund and respectfully requests the House Health and Government Operations Committee to issue a favorable report. For questions, please contact Tammy Bresnahan, Director of Advocacy for AARP Maryland at tbresnahan@aarp.org or by calling 410-302-8451.