

**House Bill 129 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services
and Public Safety Answering Points – Modifications**

Health and Government Operations Committee

January 26, 2022

Position: SUPPORT

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of House Bill 129.

HB 129 requires all public safety answering points to develop written policies and procedures for responding to a call involving an individual experiencing a mental health crisis. The policies must address procedures for triaging such a call, the resources available for dispatch, and the procedures for making a dispatch decision.

Too often individuals experiencing a mental health crisis and those around them know of little alternative but to call 9-1-1 for help. This can result in delays in care, increased frustration, and potentially more harm than help for the person in distress. But in many cases, there are more appropriate alternatives.

Though coverage varies across jurisdictions, Maryland's behavioral health crisis response system offers an array of options for serving individuals in crisis. These options may include mobile crisis call centers, mobile crisis teams, and/or crisis receiving and stabilization centers. These services significantly reduce preventable mental health crises and offer earlier intervention to stabilize individuals more quickly and at the lowest level of care appropriate.

To ensure individuals in crisis are referred to the most appropriate services and settings, it is essential that 9-1-1 dispatch personnel are familiar with the resources available to them and trained on how and when to direct individuals to those resources. This familiarity and triaging function will become even more important later this year when Maryland transitions to 9-8-8, a new standard number for all behavioral health crisis calls that should serve as an alternative to 9-1-1 in many of these situations.

For these reasons, MHAMD supports HB 129 and urges a favorable report.

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