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Economic Matters Committee

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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

HB 129 – BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CRISIS RESPONSE SERVICES AND PUBLIC
SAFETY ANSWERING POINTS- MODIFICATIONS

TESTIMONY OF DELEGATE LORIG CHARKOUDIAN

JANUARY 26, 2021

Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, and Members of the Health and
Government Operations Committee,

781,000 adults in Maryland have diagnosed mental health conditions and over 180,000 adults in our state are living with serious mental illness.¹ For this reason, mental health treatment and suicide prevention are critical health care issues for our state. One element of a comprehensive mental health care infrastructure is care for critical situations. At present, individuals are more likely to interact with law enforcement than a medical professional during a psychiatric emergency. These situations drain police resources and often result in jail time, emergency visits, injury, or death for individuals in crisis. To change this costly dynamic, we need readily accessible crisis care as an essential component of our mental health service system here in Maryland.

We are in the initial stages of building Maryland's capacity to implement a coordinated comprehensive mental health system through the Behavioral Health Crisis Grant Program. Mobile crisis units, walk-in crisis services, crisis residential beds, and other behavioral health crisis programs and services are funded through this program – an investment of \$5,000,000 for FY 2022 increasing annually to \$10,000,000 per year by 2025.

This legislation would expand crisis care by strengthening the Behavioral Health Crisis Grant Program. This legislation would also require that local government crisis teams minimize the role of law enforcement in crisis interactions. Lastly, it would pave the way toward 988 implementations which require public safety answering points, such as 911 call centers, to create a written protocol for mental health crisis calls.

¹ NAMI "Mental Health in Maryland" February 2021 Factsheet

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When Marylanders call for help during a mental health crisis they should receive services from mental health professionals. A well-designed crisis response system can be the difference between life and death for people experiencing a psychiatric emergency and a first point of contact to make sure all Marylanders are receiving vital resources to support their mental health.

I respectfully request a favorable report on HB 129.