



BOARD OF TRUSTEES

February 28, 2024

COMMITTEE: Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

BILL: SB 974 – Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 988 Trust Fund Fees

POSITION: Support

The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives.

The Foundation is pleased to support SB 974 – Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 988 Trust Fund Fees. This bill establishes a permanent funding source for the 988 Trust Fund to sustain and strengthen 988 mental health helpline services in Maryland.

Maryland established the 988 Trust Fund in 2022 to provide dedicated funding for 988, but no permanent funding source was established at that time. Instead, federal grants and state general revenue funds have supported Maryland’s 988 launch. These state and federal funds run out next year. Maryland’s 988 network needs a permanent funding source to address this fiscal cliff.

SB 974 would create this permanent funding mechanism through a \$0.25 per month 988 telecom fee modeled after Maryland’s current 911 funding structure. This would generate \$15-20 million annually to support current 988 operations, investments in new technology and targeted service expansions. This dedicated funding is essential to meet increasingly strict federal 988 standards and ensure Marylanders can access 988 for lifesaving counseling and support when they need it.

Like many communities across the country, mental and behavioral health needs in Howard County have been on the rise and barriers remain to ensuring robust and equitable access to care. In our county’s most recent health assessment, the number of residents who reported experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety jumped significantly compared to the last survey in 2018, and only 16% reported receiving some type of treatment.ⁱ We also continue to see stark racial disparities in mental health. In the same survey, Black and Hispanic residents were much more likely than their White counterparts to report feeling a lack of interest or pleasure in doing things – as were residents with low income – in addition to feelings of being down,

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depressed or hopeless. There is also growing research that shows chronic stress and trauma due to racism exacerbates mental and behavioral health challenges for people of color.

These rates are startling and reflect larger systemic issues and the need for expanded mental health and behavioral health crisis services – including and beyond 988. Ensuring sustainable funding to support local crisis call centers and other crisis services is critical to meeting the needs of all of our community members and saving lives.

We strongly believe everyone should have access to compassionate and affordable mental health care. For this reason, the Foundation **SUPPORTS SB 974 and urges a FAVORABLE report.**

Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱ Howard County Health Assessment Survey, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.hclhic.org/community/data>