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SB 974
Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund Fees
Hearing of The Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
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1:00 PM

SUPPORT

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a not-for-profit civil rights and anti-poverty legal services organization which seeks to advance social justice, economic and racial equity, and fundamental human rights in Maryland. Our Health and Benefits Equity Project advocates to protect and expand access to healthcare and safety net services for Marylanders struggling to make ends meet. We support policies and practices that are designed to eliminate economic and racial inequities and enable every Marylander to attain their highest level of health. **PJC strongly supports SB 974**, which would establish a stable funding source for the 9-8-8 Trust Fund and strengthen 9-8-8 mental health helpline services in Maryland.

We thank the Maryland General Assembly for passing SB 241 (2022) which established the 9-8-8 Trust Fund and helped ensure that when 9-8-8 went live as the designated official phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis would have an easy pathway to local crisis services. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting isolation and job loss created an increased need for on-demand behavioral health crisis services for children and adults in Maryland and a nationwide increase in calls to crisis hotlines. Although mental illness impacts all races, ethnicities and other identities, research supports that people of color and individuals identifying as LGBTQ are disproportionately impacted.¹ Similarly, substance use disorder is increasing among low-income individuals.

Maryland cannot effectively meet the needs of adults and children in crisis without sustainable funding for crisis response services. If passed, SB 974 would create permanent funding through a \$0.25 per month 9-8-8 telecom fee modeled after Maryland's current 911 funding structure. Increasing the availability of these services

¹ Though 21% of all adults in the United States experience a 12-month prevalence of any mental illness, American Native or Alaska Native (19%), Hispanic or Latinx (18%), Woolard (17%), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders (17%) and Asian (14%) adults experience a 12-month prevalence of any mental illness compared to white adults (22%). 44% of lesbian, gay and bisexual adults experience a 12-month prevalence of any mental illness. NAMI, *You Are Not Alone Statistics* (2020), https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/NAMI_YouAreNotAlone_2020_FINAL.pdf.

and ensuring access through a small fee would help children and adults receive the care they need in the community and avoid unnecessary hospitalization.

For these reasons, the Public Justice Center urges the committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** report for **SB 974**. If you have any questions about this testimony, please contact Ashley Woolard at 410-625-9409 ext. 224 or Woolarda@publicjustice.org.