

February 28, 2024

**Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

SB 974 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services—988 Trust Fund Fees

Baltimore Crisis Response, Inc. (BCRI) is a 501(c)(3) private non-profit behavioral health and crisis services organization. Incorporated in 1992, BCRI has provided behavioral health, substance use, and crisis services in Maryland for over thirty years. BCRI currently oversees the Central Maryland Regional 988 Call Center, dispatches mobile response teams, offers crisis and substance use residential units, and provides training and education on mental health. BCRI aims to provide high-quality services through holistic and trauma-informed care and resources, working closely with community partners to create a caring behavioral health ecosystem, and advocating for investments in the crisis services system.

BCRI 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.

As the administrator and one of the operators of the innovative Central Maryland Regional 988 Helpline, BCRI believes that the establishment of a permanent funding mechanism to support ongoing 988 operations and initiatives would be greatly beneficial to the sustainability of 988 services. BCRI and its partnering providers receive tens of thousands of calls for help each year from Marylanders requesting emotional support, counseling, and linkages to community resources – a figure that is only increasing as more people utilize 988 each year. The funding generated by the nominal 988 telecom fee would ensure that Maryland's crisis services providers can continue to offer these lifechanging services to all who need them.

Accordingly, Baltimore Crisis Response, Inc. (BCRI) urges the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee to pass SB 974.