



MARYLAND MILITARY COALITION

Serving Veterans through Legislative Advocacy

February 28, 2024

Honorable Josline A. Pena-Melnyk
Chair, House Health and Government Operations
Room 241
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

HB 933 – Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9-8-8 Trust Fund Fees

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

On behalf of the Maryland Military Coalition and as its Communications Director, I am providing written testimony in support of HB 933. I am a nurse and I currently serve on the Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and Families.

As a licensed healthcare professional, I testified in support of Senate Bill 293 in 2022. It passed, and in July, the Maryland Department of Health designated 9-8-8 as the State’s behavioral health crisis hotline as part of a *statewide initiative* for the coordination and delivery of the *continuum of behavioral health crisis response services* in the State. Last year, I testified on behalf of HB 271 “9-8-8 Trust Fund”, which required the Governor to include an appropriation in his budget. It also passed. Today, I am asking for a favorable report on establishing trust fund fees, necessary to enable the continued operation of the 9-8-8 lifeline. This bill established a 9-8-8 fee (\$0.25 (cents)/month) to be paid by every subscriber to a landline or cell phone. These fees will be deposited in the Trust Fund and used only for carrying out the purpose of the fund.

Suicide rates have been increasing for the past twenty years, but among active-duty personnel and veterans of the post-9/11 wars, the suicide rate is even higher, outpacing average Americans. Do you know that **FOUR times** as many active-duty personnel and war veterans of post-9/11 conflicts **have died of suicide rather than in combat**? These high suicide rates are caused by multiple factors, including risks inherent to fighting in any war such as high exposure to trauma, stress, the “military” culture and training, continued access to guns, and the difficulty of reintegrating into civilian life.

According to the Centers for Disease Control’s most recent data, **Maryland had 620 suicides in 2021¹; of which 89 were veterans²**. While getting 9-8-8 data was a little difficult, a member of the Department of Health reported that in **January 2024, there were 4,477 calls to the 9-8-8 lifeline,**

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Suicide Mortality by State](#).

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, [State-Level Veteran Suicide Data](#): 2021 Update

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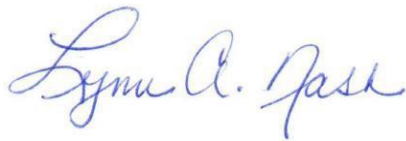
a 107% increase in monthly call volume since the transition to the three-digit number in July 2022. The volume demonstrates that **the lifeline is working**—providing needed services to Marylanders.

Maryland is home to 34,444 active-duty service members, 14,292 active-duty spouses and 25,642 reservists/national guard members with 28,019 family members³. These are Department of Defense numbers only and do not include the 1,700 active-duty U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) members and the 7,000 PHS retirees and their families or the active duty and retired National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) service members who also live in Maryland. In addition, there are 355,787 veteran households⁴. **Maryland needs continued 9-8-8 services to meet the mental health needs of our citizens, especially our veterans.**

The Maryland Military Coalition, is a voluntary, non-partisan organization representing 21 veteran service organizations who, in turn, serve over 150,000 Maryland uniformed services men and women and their families. The Coalition ***strongly supports*** HB 933- **Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 9–8–8 Trust Fund Fees** and asks for your **favorable report**.

We thank Delegate Feldmark for sponsoring this important legislation,

Respectfully,



Lynn A. Nash, PhD, RN, PHCNS-BC, FAAN
CAPT (R), U.S. Public Health Service
Communications Director

Attachment: Maryland Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2021

Maryland Military Coalition Member Organizations Follow

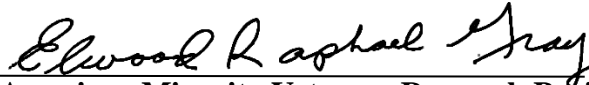
³ [Military One Source](#), as of December 31, 2022

⁴ [VA Claim Insider](#), August 10, 2023


Member Organizations, Maryland Military Coalition


Air Force Sergeants Association


American Military Society


American Minority Veterans Research Project

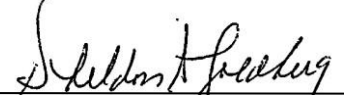

Association of the United States Navy



Commissioned Officers Association of the
US Public Health Service


Disabled American Veterans


Distinguished Flying Cross Association


Fleet Reserve Association


Jewish War Veterans of the USA


Maryland Air National Guard Retirees'
Association


Maryland Veterans Chamber of Commerce


Military Officers Association of America


Military Order of the Purple Heart

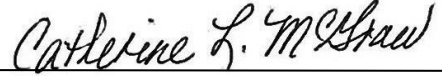

Montford Point Marines of America



National Association for Black Veterans


Naval Enlisted Reserve Association


NOAA Association of Commissioned Officers


Reserve Organization of America


Society of Military Widows


National Active and Retired Federal Employees
Veterans Affairs Directorate, NARFE MD


Veterans of Foreign Wars