

Adequate and Sustainable Funding is Necessary for Mental Health Resources

Position Statement Supporting Senate Bill 974

Given before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

Mental health services are essential to the well-being of all Marylanders. Just like we call on police or medical personnel to aid us during public safety crises, we should be able to call on professional services to help individuals experiencing mental health crises to access the best or most effective resources to cope with their hardships. The 988 mental health lifeline helps with that: it provides behavioral health services, and it is a resource that necessitates continued funding to build a stronger infrastructure to care for all Marylanders in need.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports SB 974 in establishing a permanent funding source for 988 mental health services.

SB 974 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 low cost of \$0.25 per month 988 telecom fee modeled after Maryland's current 911 funding structure. This would likely 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.

The truth is that demand for mental health services is high. From July 2022 to May 2023, the 988 helpline received close to 5 million contacts nationwide.¹ Unfortunately, the most common reason for contact was related to suicide concerns, highlighting just how crucial it is to sustain the helpline. Maryland's in-state answer rate from April to May 2023 was almost 90%, with 8,741 calls made during that period.¹ With sustainable funding for support, we can ensure that Marylanders are able to access help in a timely manner.

For these reasons, **the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee to make a favorable report on Senate Bill 974.**

Equity Impact Analysis: Senate Bill 974

Bill Summary

SB 974 establishes a permanent funding source for the 988 Trust Fund to sustain and strengthen 988 mental health helpline services in Maryland through a \$0.25 per month 988 telecom fee modeled after Maryland's current 911 funding structure. Customers of the federal Lifeline program which provides a discount on telephone services and other communications are exempt from this fee.

Background

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.

Equity Implications

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 1 in 5 adults live with mental health concerns in the United States.ⁱⁱ However, not everyone is aware of mental health services like 988. People knowledgeable about the 988 helpline as a mental health resource tend to be white, higher income, and more institutionally educated.ⁱⁱⁱ Because economic hardship is associated with increases in mental health problems,^{iv} it is important that we can sustain a helpline that is available to all. This is especially important for communities of color who disproportionately live in poverty and experience disinvestments in their communities, leaving them out of resources to cope with mental health crises.

Impact

Senate Bill 974 will likely **improve racial and health equity** in Maryland.

ⁱ Saunders, H. (2023, July 14). Taking a look at 988 suicide and crisis lifeline implementation one year after launch. *Kaiser Family Foundation*. <https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/taking-a-look-at-988-suicide-crisis-lifeline-implementation-one-year-after-launch/>

ⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d). About mental health. Retrieved February 2024 from <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Velazquez, T. (2023, November 8). Most U.S. adults remain unaware of 988 suicide and crisis lifeline. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/05/23/most-us-adults-remain-unaware-of-988-suicide-and-crisis-lifeline>

^{iv} Hodgkinson, S., Godoy, L., Beers, L. S., & Lewin, A. (2017). Improving mental health access for low-income children and families in the primary care setting. *Pediatrics*, 139(1). doi: [10.1542/peds.2015-1175](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-1175)