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Advocates Sound the Alarm About the Devastating Impact of \$116 million in Cuts to Behavioral Health Funding

Proposed budget cuts would disproportionately hurt younger Marylanders and would hinder the 988 helpline's ability to help people in crisis

ANNAPOLIS, MD (Feb. 25, 2025) – Leading behavioral health advocates today called on the General Assembly and Governor Wes Moore to restore proposed budget cuts and protect funding for community providers to ensure comprehensive behavioral health services are available to all Marylanders.

The advocates cited more than \$116 million in proposed cuts to mental health and substance use care and urged lawmakers to protect funding for critical programs serving people of all ages across the state. Unless the General Assembly acts swiftly, key programs, including the state's 988 helpline and behavioral health care for children and youth, will be cut drastically at every level – from screening and early intervention, to treatment, recovery supports and crisis services.

The budget cuts will lead to significant service reductions, driving more people to go to hospital emergency departments for care – and Maryland emergency departments already have the highest average wait times in the country.

The organizations urged lawmakers to act in several key areas:

- **Restore funding for Maryland's 988 helpline and crisis services.** Although the General Assembly in 2024 approved a 25-cent charge on phone lines to support the 988 helpline, the governor's proposed budget fails to allocate those revenues as intended. Without this funding, 988 call centers will be forced to lay off counselors; wait times for calls, texts, and chats would increase; and Marylanders in distress would suffer the consequences.
- **Restore funding for school mental health.** The proposed FY26 budget would cut annual school mental health funding provided through the Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports by \$90 million. In its first six months alone, the Consortium has supported the provision of behavioral health services to 58,000 students across 80% of Maryland schools, resulting in improved mental health outcomes for 70-80% of Maryland students.
- **Restore Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics.** The proposed FY26 budget would remove language supporting a statewide expansion of community behavioral health clinics (CCBHCs). Beginning in 2018, six providers across the state have used federal grants to creatively expand behavioral health services to reduce hospital costs and criminal justice involvement while improving health outcomes. These organizations are relying on the Maryland Department of Health to develop a plan to sustain and expand these services in the future.
- **Protect the 1% rate increase for behavioral health services included in the FY 2026 budget.** Historic underfunding of community based behavioral health services has left Maryland with

half the workforce required to meet current need. An estimated 45% of these workers are projected to leave the field in the next three to five years. Maryland must increase funding for community-based services. By strengthening these services, we can reduce the need for inpatient psychiatric care and improve the quality of life for Maryland residents.

- **Protect against proposed cuts to Medicaid.** The Medicaid program provides behavioral health services to over 260,000 people through the public behavioral health system. The Governor's FY26 budget supports a comprehensive set of behavioral health services through Medicaid, and those funds should be maintained.

The threat of cuts to these life-saving services comes at a time when the demand for mental health care is climbing. One in four adults nationally has a mental illness, and young people are in greater need for mental health supports than ever. According to data from the 2022-23 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 28% of Maryland high school students reported that their mental health was not good most of the time or always and 18% of Maryland high school students seriously considered suicide within the past year.

"We understand the challenging budget situation facing the governor and the General Assembly and support opportunities to increase revenue for the state," said **Adrienne Breidenstine, vice president for policy and communications at Behavioral Health System Baltimore**. "We believe in and support the governor's commitment to leave no Marylanders behind, and we urge our elected officials to act to protect behavioral health services so that care is available when people need it."

"School mental health funding provided by the Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports has been a game changer," said **Dan Martin, senior director of public policy at the Mental Health Association of Maryland**. "This funding is a critical investment in our future. It is ensuring that students in every corner of our state have the resources and support necessary to learn and thrive."

Organizations leading the push for legislative action include Behavioral Health System Baltimore, Inc., the Mental Health Association of Maryland, Community Behavioral Health Association of Maryland, the National Association for Mental Illness Maryland, the National Association for Mental Illness – Metro Baltimore, and the Horizon Foundation.

"Over the past six years, our community has made mental health care more accessible for tens of thousands of Howard County children, families and individuals, but these proposed cuts put all of this progress at risk," said **Nikki Highsmith Vernick, president and CEO of the Howard County-based Horizon Foundation**. "Now is NOT the time to cut life-saving behavioral health services. Doing so will cause significant harm to our residents as the need for responsive and compassionate mental and behavioral health care continues to grow."

"We used our capacity-building grant to increase access to care. We purchased medical translation software to help us communicate with all people experiencing behavioral health crises in our community. The grant has also allowed us to add nursing staff to support clients who are aging in place," said **Cari Guthrie, CEO of Cornerstone Montgomery**, a CCBHC grantee in Rockville. "By delivering the care our patients need, we have been able to reduce hospitalizations by more than 30% and emergency department usage by more than 60%."

“The CCBHC capacity-building grant has enabled us to divert individuals with substance use needs from deeper involvement in the criminal justice system by immediately connecting them to essential treatment and wraparound services,” said **Kristy Blalock, Vice President of Growth and Strategy at Gaudenzia**, a CCBHC grantee in Baltimore City. “By addressing their needs holistically, we support their recovery, reduce justice system involvement, and improve overall well-being.”