



Responding to Suicidal Ideation and Suicide for Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families

A Prevention and Postvention Toolkit



Maryland Department of Health • Behavioral Health Administration • Integrated Wellness and Prevention

mdh.suicideprevention@maryland.gov |
health.maryland.gov/bha/suicideprevention

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Suicide Prevention in the Maryland National Guard



Suicide prevention remains a priority across the Maryland National Guard. While most service members demonstrate resilience and strength, suicide continues to impact military communities nationwide. Understanding the data helps guide prevention, postvention, and support efforts across our units.

Suicide Prevention Data Overview (2026)

Suicide & Veterans

- Suicide was the **2nd leading cause of death for Veterans under age 45** ([2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#)).
- In 2022, there were **47,891 suicides among U.S. adults** (approx. 131 per day).
- Approximately **40% of Veterans who died by suicide in 2022 had received VHA care** in the year of or prior to their death.

Active Military & National Guard

- Suicide rates in the Active Component and Reserves increased in 2023 compared to 2022.
- The **National Guard suicide rate in 2023 was lower than in 2022**, highlighting the impact of sustained prevention efforts ([Annual Report on Suicide in the Military, 2023](#)).

Method of Suicide

- **Firearms remain the leading method of suicide nationally and in Maryland.**
- Lethal means safety during times of crisis is a critical prevention strategy

Maryland Veteran Landscape

- Maryland ranks **19th nationally** in total veteran population.
- Approximately **360,000 veterans** reside in Maryland ([Department of Veterans & Military Families, 2026](#)).
- **12 VA clinics and medical centers** provide access to primary care, mental health, and specialized veteran services statewide.

Substance Use & Co-Occurring Conditions

- ~2.4 million veterans affected by alcohol use disorder.
- ~1.7 million affected by drug use disorders.
- ~1.2 million affected by marijuana use disorder.
- ~1.4 million veterans experience both a substance use disorder and a mental health condition.

Source: ([Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022](#))

Co-occurring conditions significantly increase suicide risk.

Problem Gambling & Veterans

- Veterans are **2–3 times more likely** to experience problem gambling ([NCPG, 2026](#))
- ~40% of veterans seeking gambling treatment report a suicide attempt.
- Maryland 2022 prevalence data: ~14% of respondents reported Armed Services affiliation ([Tracy & Brown, 2022](#)).

This data reinforces the importance of proactive leadership, early intervention, lethal means safety, and coordinated behavioral health support to strengthen readiness and protect Maryland's service members and veterans.

Warning Signs for Suicide

Warning signs are observable indicators that a person may be thinking about suicide and may urgently need help.

SIGNS TO LOOKOUT FOR



Talking About

- Wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Being a burden to others

Behavior Change

- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Losing interest in activities
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly and irrationally
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Sharp drop in performance
- Giving away possessions

ASK DIRECTLY



If you think someone may be thinking of suicide, ask directly. Asking the question "are you thinking of suicide?" can open the door to a conversation that may save a life. It can be the first step toward getting someone the support they need.

LETHAL MEANS



Consider when to call for professional help or law enforcement. If firearms or other lethal means are present in the situation, connect to help ASAP.

HOW TO HELP: ABCDE & ACE



- A** Ask Directly
- B** Be an Active Listener
- C** Continue to Keep Them Safe
- D** Discuss Options and Connect to Help
- E** Encourage, Support, and Follow Up

Service members, veterans, and their families also use **ACE** when responding to risk of suicide.

- A** Assess and **ASK** if help is needed
- C** Offer **CARE** to stabilize and provide safety
- E** **ESCORT** to helping resource

GET HELP NOW



If someone is...

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

MENTAL HEALTH OR SUBSTANCE USE CRISIS?



CALL OR TEXT 988

988 | SUICIDE & CRISIS
LIFELINE

For the Veterans Crisis Line,
Call 988 then Press 1, or Text 838255
CONFIDENTIAL AND AVAILABLE 24/7

Safe and Secure Storage for Firearm Owners

Storing your firearms safely and securely can save lives. By storing your firearms, you can prevent your weapons from being stolen. You can also prevent your weapons from being accessed by loved ones at risk of suicide or violence against others.

Be SMART | Safely Store Your Firearms



- > Store and lock firearms **unloaded**
- > Store and lock ammunition **separately from firearms**
- > Make sure **keys/combinations are not accessible** to people in the household in crisis (at risk for violence against self or others)
- > If someone is in crisis in the household, **temporarily remove firearms** from your home or store them securely outside the home until the situation stabilizes.
- > **Avoid storing firearms unattended in vehicles** to prevent theft

LOCKING DEVICES



1 Cable Lock (Free–\$50)
A device that blocks the chamber to prevent firing. Typically requires a key or a combination to unlock, usable on most firearms. It is good to prevent children from accessing, but can usually be cut with bolt cutters/simple devices.

2 Trigger Lock (\$5–\$50)
The two-piece lock fits over the trigger guard. Blocks trigger but do not prevent loading. Typically requires a key or a combination to unlock. Should not be used on a loaded firearm (can still be fired). Not usable on lever-action firearms.

LOCKING BOXES

1 Lock Box (\$25–\$350)
Small safe to store handguns/small firearms. Typically requires a key, combination, or fingerprint to unlock. Lock boxes can be permanently mounted to prevent theft.

2 Safe (\$100–\$2,500)
Stores a variety of firearms/other valuables. Typically requires a key, combination, or biometrics to unlock. Most secure options for multiple firearms, and for theft prevention.




Temporary Off-Site Storage During a Crisis

If someone in your household, including yourself, is experiencing a period of emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, or significant behavioral changes, consider temporarily storing firearms outside of the home until the situation stabilizes. Temporary off-site storage can create space and reduce risk during a high-risk period. This step is about safety and protection during a crisis, not permanent removal.

Potential Temporary Storage Options May Include:



-  A **trusted** friend or family member
-  A **licensed** firearm retailer
-  A **local gun range**
-  A **local law enforcement agency** (for temporary voluntary storage, where available and **legally permitted**).
-  Other **secure community storage** options

Why Temporary Storage Matters

Research shows that many suicide attempts occur during short periods of intense distress. Creating physical distance between a person in crisis and a lethal means can significantly reduce risk.

Temporary storage:

- Protects the individual during vulnerable periods
- Supports recovery without long-term consequences
- Preserves firearm ownership rights
- Allows for return once safety is restored

View the Maryland Safe Storage Map: mdpgv.org/safestoragemap/

Returning Firearms

Once the crisis has passed and safety has been restored, firearms can be returned in accordance with legal requirements and safe handling practices. Decisions about return should prioritize ongoing stability and well-being.

Important Considerations

Temporary storage should comply with state and federal laws, with firearms stored unloaded and ammunition separately whenever possible. The purpose is to create distance during a high-risk period, not permanent removal. Once safety is restored, firearms can be returned in accordance with legal requirements

FAQ: Grieving and Loss

: Grieving and Loss

A suicide loss within a unit can affect more than individuals; it can impact unit cohesion, morale, and overall readiness. Service members may respond in different ways. Some may appear unaffected, while others may experience changes in mood, focus, sleep, or performance.

Leaders should remain attentive to changes at the squad and team level following a loss. Increased withdrawal, irritability, risk-taking behavior, decreased performance, or noticeable shifts in morale may indicate someone is struggling. Proactive leadership following a loss helps prevent additional harm and reinforces a culture where seeking support is a sign of strength. Early, supportive engagement can help protect both individual well-being and mission readiness.

The following questions and answers provide practical guidance for service members, leaders, and families navigating the impact of a suicide loss. They are intended to support healthy grieving, reduce stigma, and strengthen unit connection during a difficult time.

1. **Is there a right way to feel or react when someone in my service member, veteran, and family (SMVF) community dies?**

There's no "right" or "correct" way to feel. When someone passes away unexpectedly, there can be feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, shock, numbness, and more. The most important thing is to acknowledge your feelings. Dismissing your feelings can lead to deeper issues in the future.

Bear in mind that this loss might bring up difficult emotions or reminders of personal experiences, even if you were not close with the person who died. If you are feeling stressed, seek support promptly. Many community resources can help, including doctors, religious leaders, and mental health professionals. You can also connect to 988. The Veterans Crisis Line can be reached by calling 988 then pressing 1, or texting 838255.

2. **How can I learn more information about the person's death?**

When something traumatic happens, it is normal to want more information about what occurred and why. However, we have a responsibility to respect the privacy and wishes of the family. Official updates will be shared through the appropriate chain of command. Rely on those communications rather than informal conversations, social media, or speculation. Rumors and unverified information can cause additional harm to the family, the unit, and the broader Guard community. Practicing discretion, including mindful use of social media, helps protect the dignity of the person who died and their loved ones.

In military culture, we value discipline and respect. Being careful about what we share, repeat, or post is part of taking care of each other during difficult times. If you have questions, consider speaking directly with your leadership, chaplain, or Director of Psychological Health rather than seeking information from unofficial sources.

3. What are the signs that someone may be struggling and may need more help?

After a loss in the community, some people may be at higher risk of crisis and suicide. Some signs indicate a person is at IMMEDIATE risk of suicide. If these signs are observed, do not leave the person unsupervised and immediately connect them to help:

- Talking about wanting to die or suicide
- Expressing hopelessness about the future
- Talking about being unbearably overwhelmed, feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Looking for ways or making plans to die, such as obtaining access to a gun or medications; researching suicide online

Other worrisome changes in behavior can be a sign that someone may be in distress and at risk of suicide. Refer individuals who display these signs to support:

- Changes in sleep (increased or decreased sleeping, difficulty falling asleep, etc.)
- Acting anxious or agitated, or behaving recklessly
- Dramatic changes in eating or appetite
- Showing hostility, rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Engaging in non-suicidal self-injury
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Withdrawing or isolating oneself

Grief affects people in different ways. Many of the reactions listed can be a normal part of grieving after a loss. In a Guard setting, certain events or milestones may temporarily intensify emotions. Anniversaries of the loss, drill weekends, annual training, deployments, promotions, or other significant dates can bring renewed reminders of the person who died. This does not mean someone is “going backward” in their healing; it is a common part of the grieving process. Remain aware of these periods and check in with one another during times that may carry added emotional weight.

If these signs persist beyond what seems typical, increase in intensity, or begin to affect duty performance, relationships, or safety, leaders and peers should remain aware and encourage a supportive connection to resources.

4. How can I support my friends and family?

The loss of someone to suicide can affect the entire community. Supporting each other can make a significant difference in healing. It is normal to worry about saying the “right” or “perfect” thing after a loss. It is more important to keep some key principles in mind.

- **Be empathetic and kind.** Try to understand their reactions.
- **Be honest** when you don't have an answer to a question.
- **Reach out for support.** You can reach out to the list of resources accompanying this document. If you, or someone you know are in crisis and need support - please call, text, or chat 988 (National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline)
- **Suggest voluntary support.** This includes participating in unit town halls, group check-ins, and chaplain-led sessions. These opportunities reinforce connection, reduce isolation, and support healing across the unit.
- **Be there for them.** Sometimes, just being there and listening is the most helpful thing you can do. If you don't know what to say, you can simply sit there with them.
- **Encourage memories.** Sharing positive memories about the person who died can be a comforting way to remember them.
- **Stay connected.** Keeping in touch with a simple message asking how they are can mean a lot
- **Help others.** Some find comfort in helping others or by getting involved in suicide prevention efforts. You may find respite in sharing your story, or in awareness events in your area.



5. How can I support the grieving family and friends?

It is important to respect the wishes of the loss survivors. If you are unsure of what their wishes are, and you are close to them, you can ask, “How can I best support you right now?” to give them a chance to say what they need/want during this difficult time. It is also a normal response for them not to know what will be best.

Each person grieves differently; grief is a process and needs/wants to change over time. It is important to create a non-judgmental safe space where each person can grieve in their own way. If the person you asked doesn't know what they need/want in those moments, you can offer to cook, clean, run errands, sit with them and talk, sit with them in silence, share resources like books, support groups, etc. Memorial service information may be shared when it is available, and the service is open to the public. You can offer to attend these memorialization services with the loss survivors.



6. What are some coping strategies I can use or recommend to others?

If you would like to do something to remember the person who died, there are many ways you can honor their memory. Ideas may include writing a personal note to the family, attending the memorial service, creating a memory book, or doing something kind for another person in honor of that friend. Some simple strategies can help you feel better.

- Try some relaxation techniques
 - Take three deep, slow breaths
 - Count to 10 and back down
 - Picture yourself in a favorite calm and relaxing place
- Engage in favorite activities or hobbies
- Exercise
 - Take a walk or hike in nature
 - Play a sport
 - Try a new physical activity
- Write a list of people you can turn to for support
- Write a list of things you are looking forward to
- Talk to others about how they have coped with difficulties in the past, and see if they have any new strategies for you to try
- Consider using Master Resilience Training (MRT) skills and techniques

Additionally, religion and spirituality can be a source of comfort for some individuals, while others may not find it helpful during times of distress. Avoid assuming someone's beliefs or offering spiritual explanations unless they have indicated that this is meaningful to them.

If appropriate, you may ask: **“Would it be helpful to speak with a chaplain or someone from your faith community?”** This allows the individual to decide what support feels right.

Chaplains are trained to provide confidential, nonjudgmental support to all service members and families, regardless of religious affiliation. They focus on listening, supporting, and meeting the person they are.

Involving someone who can provide appropriate support is an act of care, not failure.

7. What should I do if I don't feel equipped to support someone who may be struggling?

Supporting someone who is grieving or struggling can be difficult. Not everyone feels confident having conversations about suicide or emotional distress. You may also be navigating your own reactions to the loss. If you feel unsure, overwhelmed, or unable to provide support, it is okay to bring in someone else who may be better positioned to help. This could include a trusted leader, chaplain, Director of Psychological Health, behavioral health professional, or another supportive individual.

If you notice someone expressing suicidal thoughts or behaviors and you do not feel equipped to manage the situation alone, do not carry that responsibility by yourself.

8. Is there anything I should avoid saying/doing?

- Avoid using the phrase "commit suicide." Instead, say "died by suicide."
- Avoid debating whether suicide is "right" or "wrong" or whether feelings are "good" or "bad."
- Avoid lecturing on the value of life.
- Avoid acting shocked. This may put distance between you and the person you are trying to help.
- **Don't be sworn to secrecy; seek support.**
- Avoid offering superficial reassurance. Instead, offer hope that alternatives are available.
- **Never dare them to act on suicidal feelings.**

9. How do I move forward?

Moving forward after a loss doesn't mean forgetting them; it means finding a way to carry their memory with you as you continue your life's journey.

- **Find a New Normal:** Try to find a new normal that includes the memory of the person you lost. Your experience of grief will likely not be linear; you might feel better some days and worse on other days. Lean on the supportive people and resources in your life.
- **Hold onto Hope:** Allow yourself to believe in the possibility of healing and happiness in the future. Your path may not be clear now, but each step forward is a step toward finding peace.

Experiencing a suicide loss is deeply painful, and it's normal to feel a range of emotions. Remember, it's important to talk about your feelings, seek support, and take care of yourself. By supporting each other, we can navigate through this difficult time together. If you or someone you know is struggling, don't hesitate to reach out to a trusted resource or person for help.

Resources are available. If you want assistance or support, please reach out.

National Resources

- Veterans/Military Crisis Line: Offers free, confidential support and counseling services 24/7. Call 988 and press 1, text 838255, or chat at [veteranscrisisline.net](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net)
- Real Warriors Campaign: Provides resources addressing various mental health challenges, including suicide prevention, at [health.mil](https://www.health.mil)
- Military OneSource: offers a wide range of resources and support services, including non-medical counseling, financial counseling, and legal assistance, at [militaryonesource.mil](https://www.militaryonesource.mil)
- Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO): Provides resources, links, and policy information about prevention resources for SMVF. [dspo.mil](https://www.dspo.mil)
- Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS): National nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources for all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one. [taps.org/suicide](https://www.taps.org/suicide)
- Director of Psychological Health: Intervention-trained personnel who can guide service members to resources. nationalguard.mil/News/Article/3381921/psychological-health-directors-discuss-readiness-impacts
- Worried About a Veteran: Resource with information on warning signs and a variety of practical guides for helping a loved one at risk of suicide. [worriedaboutaveteran.org](https://www.worriedaboutaveteran.org)
- Talking to Children Who Have Been Affected by Suicide or an Attempted Suicide of Someone They Know. [mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Together We Can Talking to Children CLEARED 508 12-19-19.pdf](https://mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Together_We_Can_Talking_to_Children_CLEARED_508_12-19-19.pdf)
- Rocky Mountain MIRECC for Suicide Prevention - Talking to Kids (T2K) about Suicide. mirecc.va.gov/visn19/talk2kids/schoolage.asp
- Vets4Warriors: 24/7 Immediate, confidential, ongoing peer support staffed by veterans for service members, veterans, family members, and caregivers. Providing help to every member of the military-connected community before challenges turn into crises. Call, request a call, chat, or email. [vets4warriors.com](https://www.vets4warriors.com)
- Veteran (Vet) Centers: Provides confidential counseling services for veterans, service members (including National Guard and Reserve), and their families. Services include individual counseling, group counseling, grief support, military sexual trauma counseling, and referral to additional resources. Vet Centers operate separately from VA medical centers and maintain strict confidentiality. For service members with security clearances (including Secret, TS, or TS/SCI), seeking care at a Vet Center does not automatically affect clearance status. Services are private, and records are not shared with command without written permission, except in situations involving immediate safety concerns. [va.gov/find-locations](https://www.va.gov/find-locations)

Smartphone Applications

- Objective Zero: Connects users to peer support and curated resources. objectivezero.org
- PTSD Coach: Provides information and tools to handle symptoms, along with direct links to support PTSD-related concerns: mobile.va.gov/app/ptsd-coach
- Suicide Safety Plan: Virtual place to store coping strategies and suicide prevention resources to use in the event of a suicidal crisis: suicidesafetyplan.app

Maryland Resources

- Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families. veterans.maryland.gov
- Maryland National Guard. military.maryland.gov/NG/Pages/Suicide-Prevention-Program.aspx
- Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence. health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Traumatic-Brain-Injury-Center-of-Excellence
- VA Maryland Health Care System. va.gov/maryland-health-care
- Chaplain Services: Our chaplains are trained to offer confidential counseling and support to service members and their families, regardless of religious affiliation. military.maryland.gov/NG/Pages/Chaplain.aspx
- Explore VA Health Care and Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families locations near you. geodata.md.gov/veterans
- COMPACT Act. va.gov/maryland-health-care/programs/compact-act
- PACT Act. va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits
- Maryland Department of Health, Behavioral Health Administration. health.maryland.gov/bha
- Maryland's Commitment to Veterans. health.maryland.gov/veterans
- Maryland Access Point. aging.maryland.gov/Pages/maryland-access-point

Military Installation Support Resources (Maryland)

Joint Base Andrews (JBA)

Military & Family Readiness Center

- **Address:** 1191 Menoher Dr, Joint Base Andrews, MD 20762, USA
 - **Phone:** (301) 981-7087 (Comm)
 - **Hours (typical):**
 - Monday-Wednesday & Friday: 7:30 AM – 4:30 PM
 - Thursday: 7:30 AM – 12:00 PM
- andrewsfss.com/mfrc/

The MFRC supports military families with readiness and relocation services, deployment support, employment assistance, financial readiness, Military & Family Life Counseling (MFLC), relocation assistance, and additional family support programming.

Chaplain Office / Religious Support

- **Main Chapel Phone:** (301) 981-2111 — to reach the **Joint Base Andrews Chapel staff/chaplain office** during duty hours.
- **Crisis Calls Immediate Pastoral Support** - call 202-498-4343 (1 hour Response)
- **After-Hours Duty Chaplain:** Contact the **Command Post** and ask for the *duty chaplain*: (301) 981-5058.
- **Email:** 316.wg.hc.chapel.staff@us.af.mil — general chapel inquiries.

Locations at JBA:

- Chapel One — 1345 Arkansas Rd, JBA
- Chapel Two — 3715 Fetchet Dr, JBA
- Hospital Chapel — 1050 W. Perimeter Rd, JBA

Chaplains provide confidential spiritual care, counseling, crisis support, and religious programming for service members and families, regardless of faith affiliation.

Naval Air Station Patuxent River, MD 20670-1541, USA (NAS Pax River)

Address: 22268 Cedar Point Road, Building 409, Patuxent River, MD 20670-1154, USA

Main Phone (Operator): (301) 342-3000

Quarterdeck: (301) 342-1096

Fleet & Family Support Center (FFSC)

(Navy equivalent of Family Readiness Center)

Address:

21993 Bundy Road, Building 2090

Patuxent River, MD 20670-1132, USA

Phone: (301) 342-4911

Email: naspaxriverffsc@us.navy.mil

Hours:

- Monday – Thursday: 7:30 AM – 4:30 PM
 - Friday: 7:30 AM – 4:00 PM
- (Closed weekends & holidays)

The **FFSC** provides support similar to a Family Readiness Center, offering **deployment support, relocation assistance, employment and education resources, family advocacy, and more.**

Naval Air Station Patuxent River, MD 20670-1541, USA (NAS Pax River)

Installation Contact Information

- **Address:** 22268 Cedar Point Road, Building 409, Patuxent River, MD 20670-1154, USA
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- **Hours:**
 - Monday – Thursday: 7:30 AM – 4:30 PM
 - Friday: 7:30 AM – 4:00 PM(Closed weekends & holidays)

The **FFSC** provides support similar to a Family Readiness Center, offering **deployment support, relocation assistance, employment and education resources, family advocacy, and more.**

Naval Air Station Patuxent River - Counseling

- **Direct Counseling Line:** (202) 819-1132
 - **Clinic / FFSC Main Line:** (301) 342-4911
- Director: Michelle Adams

Counseling services provide confidential support for service members and families.

Base Religious Services / Chaplain Office

- **Chaplain Office (Religious Programs Center):** (301) 342-3811 — main phone for the NAS Patuxent River chapel and religious programming.
- **Emergency After Hours:** (202) 439-4243

Address: St. Nicholas Chapel & Religious Programs Center, 22187 West Arnold Circle, Building 401 NAS Patuxent River, MD 20670-1541, USA

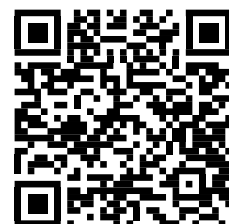
*(Like most Navy installations, you can usually reach an on-call chaplain through that main office number during regular hours. After duty hours, contact the **Command Duty Officer (CDO)** for access to a duty chaplain.)*

Maryland is fortunate to have a diverse system that provides support services across our state. Please refer to the [Military Connected Community Financial Resource List](#) for potential partners that offer financial assistance programs in Maryland. Specific eligibility criteria will vary.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

If you need support - please call, text, or chat online with 988 (National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline)

988.maryland.gov





CONTRIBUTORS

We are indebted to the staff members from the Maryland Department of Health, Office of Integrated Wellness and Prevention, Suicide Prevention Program, who saw the need for prevention and developed this toolkit.

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Maryland
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

**Behavioral Health Administration
Office of Integrated Wellness and
Prevention** (Formerly Office of Suicide
Prevention)

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health.maryland.gov/bha**