

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Health Department Expands Suicide Prevention Campaign to Broader Cultural Audience

Columbia, MD – The Howard County Health Department today announced an expansion of the “It’s OK to Ask” suicide prevention campaign to raise awareness and reduce stigma about mental health and suicide across all ages and cultures. Data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated a need for additional outreach to youth and adults who may be experiencing mental health challenges due to increased stress and isolation. Campaign materials can be found [here](#). Photos from the event may be found [here](#) and video footage is [here](#).

The 2021 Howard County Health Assessment Report found that 35% of residents reported feeling depressed or lonely in the previous 2-weeks. Further, 50% of residents reported feeling nervous or anxious in the previous 2-week period. This is an increase of more than 10% since the last County health assessment survey completed in 2018. In the U.S., 1 in 4 adults suffer from a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year and 75% of these conditions begin by age 24.

“Our goal is that through these relatable images, we can lessen the stigma about mental health and get people talking,” said Howard County Health Officer Dr. Maura Rossman. “Mental health conditions affect people of all ages, races, ethnicities, professions and economic status. The best place to begin if you or someone you know is having a difficult time, is with a simple conversation. It’s OK to ask someone how they are doing, and it’s OK to ask for help.”

"So many members of our community struggle with mental health challenges," said Howard County Executive Calvin Ball. "You can begin to help a friend or family member with a simple conversation. Today we're taking critical steps reach more of our vulnerable residents, expanding our mental health campaign to ensure everyone knows, 'It's OK to ASK.' The first step can be the hardest, but each of us can be a lifeline to those facing struggles. Our actions, as individuals and collectively, can make a difference and save lives."

The 2022 launch of the “It’s Ok to Ask” campaign is an expansion of the evidence-based 2019 youth suicide prevention campaign developed by the Health Department to address an increase in suicide

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deaths among teens ages 15-19. While this work is ongoing, additional campaign materials have been developed to target the Howard County community across the lifespan.

Community partners including members of the Healthy Minds and Suicide Prevention Coalition, the Local Behavioral Health Authority Board, and several local affinity groups were consulted on messaging and images for the campaign. The campaign aims to encourage residents to have conversations about mental health and to promote help-seeking behaviors. Each campaign image includes a QR code to culturally responsive resources housed on the Howard County Health Department website.

“In the past two years since the beginning of the pandemic, Grassroots has seen a dramatic 79% increase in Crisis Hotline calls from people who are depressed and lonely, anxious and even feeling hopeless. They want to talk about their fears and despair, their personal and family conflicts. All people – no matter age, gender, ethnicity, or income – are welcome at Grassroots. Call the hotline at 410-531-6677 or walk in at 6700 Freetown Road. A Grassroots counselor is waiting and ready 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.” said Dr. Mariana Izraelson, Executive Director, Grassroots Intervention Center.

For more information and additional resources available through the Health Department “It’s OK to Ask” suicide prevention campaign, visit <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/health/suicide-prevention>.

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