SENATE HEALTH, HUMAN SERVICES AND SENIOR CITIZENS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

SENATE, No. 2447

with committee amendments

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: JULY 20, 2020

The Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee reports favorably and with committee amendments Senate Bill No. 2447.

As amended by the committee, this bill establishes a toll free helpline for first responders, health care workers, and other frontline workers experiencing mental health issues related to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, including, but not limited to, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance use disorder.

Under the bill as amended, the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) in the Department of Human Services will establish the helpline. The DMHAS will be authorized to utilize or expand existing mental health resources available through the DMHAS, as well as to consult or contract with an appropriate third party entity. The helpline is to be accessible 24 hours a day, seven days per week and is to respond to calls from first responders, health care workers, and their families. The operators of the helpline are to seek to identify callers who should be referred to further peer support and counseling services and provide appropriate referrals.

To the greatest extent possible, the operators of the help line are to be: (1) familiar with mental health issues commonly experienced by first responders health care workers, and their families, including, but not limited to, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance use disorder, as well as the aspects of those mental health issues that are unique to first responders, health care workers, and their families; or (2) trained to provide counseling services involving marriage and family life, substance use disorder, personal stress management, and other emotional or psychological disorders or conditions which may be likely to adversely affect the personal and service-related well-being of first responders, health care workers, and their families.

The amended bill provides that the DMHAS is to ensure that the names and identities of the persons calling, the information discussed, and any referrals for further peer support or counseling are kept

confidential; except that the DMHAS will have the authority to establish guidelines providing for the tracking of any person who exhibits a severe emotional or psychological disorder or condition which the operator handling the call reasonably believes might result in harm to the first responder, health care worker, or any other person.

COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS:

The committee amendments place responsibility for establishing the helpline with the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) in the Department of Human Services, and remove from the bill references to the Department of Health and the University Behavioral HealthCare of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

The committee amendments provide that, in establishing the helpline, the DMHAS may utilize or expand existing mental health resources, and may further consult or contract with an appropriate third party entity.

The committee amendments expand the scope of the bill to include any mental health issue related to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, including, but not limited to, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance use disorder.

The committee amendments remove language that would have made the bill applicable to “other frontline workers.”

The committee amendments make various technical changes involving grammar and to update the title and synopsis of the bill to reflect the amendments.