



February 13, 2020

The Honorable Senator William C. Smith, Jr
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Support– SB 454: Public Safety – Mandatory Mental Health Training – First Responders and Law Enforcement Officers

Dear Chairman Smith and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Psychiatric Society (MPS) is a state medical organization whose physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Formed more than sixty years ago to support the needs of psychiatrists and their patients, MPS works to ensure available, accessible and comprehensive quality mental health resources for all Maryland citizens; and strives through public education to dispel the stigma and discrimination of those suffering from a mental illness. As the district branch of the American Psychiatric Association covering the state of Maryland excluding the D.C. suburbs, MPS represents over 700 psychiatrists as well as physicians currently in psychiatric training.

MPS supports Senate Bill 454: Public Safety – Mandatory Mental Health Training – First Responders and Law Enforcement Officers (SB 454). First responders and law enforcement officers routinely encounter individuals with mental illness in many different types of situations and in roles that include criminal offenders, disorderly persons, missing persons, complainants, victims, and persons in need of care. Because the individual's mental illness is not always self-evident to a first responder or law enforcement officer, he may try to handle the situation as usual by giving directions, issuing commands, or making an arrest. For an individual experiencing a mental health crisis, such routine encounters for first responders and law enforcement officers can be upsetting and potentially exacerbate the anxiety or paranoia that the individual is experiencing.

The approaches taught in a mandatory mental health training course, as established under SB 454, should help defuse the uncertainty of a situation, both for first responders and the individual experiencing the crisis. Mental health training will provide crucial and potentially life-saving skills to ensure the safety of law enforcement professionals, first responders, and those they encounter in the course of their work. De-escalation techniques can defuse tense situations involving people with serious mental illness, but also involving people in the midst of severe life stress or who are acutely



intoxicated. Furthermore, information about crisis intervention services and mental health supports may ensure that individuals get appropriately diverted to treatment rather than jail.

Finally, sensitivity to the early signs of depression or post-traumatic stress disorder may be life-saving for the first responders and law enforcement officers themselves, given that as many as 12% of police officers have considered suicidal thoughts

For all the reasons above, MPS asks the committee for an unfavorable report of SB 454. If you have any questions with regard to this testimony, please feel free to contact Thomas Tompsett Jr. at tommy.tompsett@mdlobbyist.com.

Respectfully submitted,
The Legislative Action Committee for the Maryland Psychiatric Society