



HOMELESS PERSONS REPRESENTATION PROJECT, INC.

201 North Charles Street, Suite 1104 Baltimore, MD 21201

SUPPORT – SB 454 – Public Safety - Mandatory Mental Health Training - First Responders & Law Enforcement Officers

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, February 13, 2020

Testimony of Akyra Brown, Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc.

Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc. (HPRP) is a non-profit legal services provider that provides free legal representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness on legal issues that will lead to an end to homelessness. HPRP's Homeless Youth Initiative serves unaccompanied homeless youth ages 24 and younger.

HPRP strongly supports SB 454, which will protect people with mental health disabilities by ensuring that first responders and law enforcement are trained to deescalate stressful situations and otherwise interact with the public in a trauma-informed and safe manner. Awareness of the criminalization of poverty and mental illness is a critical capacity for these professionals.

People experiencing homelessness are disproportionately affected by mental illness and must live their private lives in public spaces, which increases contact with first responders and law enforcement.

Mental health disabilities are often a precursor to housing instability if they negatively affect an individual's ability to sustain employment, housing, and support networks. In addition, the trauma of housing instability and homelessness very often causes or exacerbates mental illness. Because they are unhoused, homeless individuals are often criminalized simply because they are experiencing the trauma of poverty out in the open. SB 454 acts as a critical stepping stone towards creating a response grounded in awareness of the intersections of mental illness, poverty, and criminalization.

People experiencing homelessness often hold other marginalized identities that can further put them at risk of harmful interactions with law enforcement and first responders. Youth, people of color, sexual and gender minorities, and veterans are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness. These compounding marginalized identities can lead to interactions with first responders that are further traumatizing, often lead to violent conclusions, and exacerbate distrustful feelings towards first responders. According to a 2015 study by the Treatment Advocacy Center, "Numbering fewer than 1 in 50 U.S. adults, individuals with untreated severe mental illness are involved in at least 1 in 4 and as many as half of all fatal police shootings."¹ Considering that less than 1 in 50 adults could be considered as having "severe mental illness" the rate of fatal shootings is wildly disproportionate and highlights the immediate need our communities have for first responders and law enforcement to prioritize mental health awareness. A rehabilitative approach which focuses on addressing interactions between people with mental health disabilities and first responders or law enforcement officers as a public health issue will protect some of the most vulnerable communities from further trauma and ease community relations.

HPRP strongly urges the committee to issue a Favorable Report on SB 454.

Please contact Akyra Brown at abrown@hprplaw.org or 410-685-6589 ext. 15 for additional information

¹ TREATMENT ADVOCACY CENTER, "OVERLOOKED IN THE UNDERCOUNTED: THE ROLE OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN FATAL LAW ENFORCEMENT ENCOUNTERS," available at: <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/overlooked-in-the-undercounted.pdf>