



HB 129 - SUPPORT

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**HB 129 SUPPORT
Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services
And Public Safety Answering Points – Modifications**

Health and Government Committee
January 26, 2022

Dear Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

I am a psychotherapist from Silver Spring. I am writing on behalf of the Silver Spring Justice Coalition (SSJC) in support of HB 129, Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services and Public Safety Answering Points – Modifications. SSJC is a broad-based coalition of faith groups, advocacy organizations, families of impacted individuals, and community members that was formed in 2018 after a police officer killed Robert White, a Black man living with mental illness who was taking his daily walk in the park and looked suspicious to the police officer. Our mission is to reduce the presence of police in our communities; eliminate violence and harm by police; establish transparency and accountability; and redirect public funds toward community needs.

Delegate Charkoudian has championed the cause of shifting mental health crisis response to mental health providers by setting statewide standards that require

each jurisdiction to minimize law enforcement interaction with individuals in crisis. We applaud her leadership. We can attest to the urgent need for state regulations and standards to prevent harm by police when a member of the community is experiencing a mental health crisis.

SSJC advocates for the same standards in Montgomery County. State legislation will bolster and codify our efforts to require county police to operate according to regulations that limit law enforcement interaction with individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. Without statewide legislation and standards, we remain concerned that individuals experiencing a mental health crisis would be subject to changes in county government policy and police department leadership, and would be vulnerable to the continuation of police encounters with mentally ill individuals, which far too often lead to harm and death at the hands of police. A person experiencing a mental health crisis deserves to be treated with compassion and understanding by mental health providers and peers. Put bluntly, without the force of state law requiring standards of practice that limit police engagement, we will remain very concerned that Black and Brown and immigrant members of Montgomery County who have persistent mental illness, or are in the midst of a mental health crisis, would remain at-risk of violence by police. Since 2020, three men experiencing a mental health crisis were shot to death by Montgomery County police.

The role of the emergency call center is key to the deployment of a mental health team, rather than police. At this first point of contact, policies and protocols for triage and dispatch are critical to ensuring implementation of a mental health driven crisis response. Montgomery County is funding a significant expansion of the number of mental health crisis teams; triage and dispatch needs to be revamped accordingly. State legislation to that effect strengthens this crucial change in procedures, policies, and staffing. Anyone suffering an active mental health crisis needs a compassionate and supportive voice to answer their call, preferably a trained mental health worker with a breadth of cultural knowledge and proficiency in languages spoken in our county.

Delegate Charkoudian's bill supports standards of care for anyone suffering a mental health crisis. In these times of heightened stress, we know that that could be anyone, any child or family member, in any family. House Bill 129 goes a long way to ensuring that everyone who needs a crisis team at their door, or on the street, will receive compassionate, trauma-informed, and appropriate care from well-trained mental health staff and peers, and that the engagement of law enforcement in such crises will be limited.

We strongly urge a favorable report on HB 129.

Respectfully,

Naomi Nim, Ed.D, LPC, NCC, BC-DMT

Silver Spring Justice Coalition Mental Health Committee Co-Chair
Silver Spring, MD