



Senate Bill 326

Public Safety - Law Enforcement Agencies - Peer Support Programs

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**
WITH AMENDMENTS

To: Judicial Proceedings Committee

Date: January 30, 2025

From: Sarah Sample

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS SB 326 WITH AMENDMENTS**. This bill promotes more stability within the public safety workforce across Maryland, where employers currently face historic challenges and vacancies. It does so by expanding opportunities for law enforcement officers to seek support from their peers when struggling with the mental and emotional impacts of working in public safety.

This bill establishes an additional avenue of support for law enforcement officers who might be experiencing serious mental and emotional distress but might not yet be emotionally ready to seek medical attention from a professional. Counties believe SB 326 takes a balanced approach by authorizing confidential peer-to-peer interactions but also ensuring transparency and accountability for serious crimes and during exigent circumstances. MACo commends this effort and offers an amendment to include corrections officers in the provisions of the bill as these professionals have a comparable risk of severe injury, trauma, and long-term adverse health effects.

Public safety is a profession where, rightfully, courage and composure are always necessary. At the same time, law enforcement and detention center officers can be the targets of violence, and are often exposed to grave harms inflicted on vulnerable populations and children. This exposure is well known to take a serious toll on the mental and emotional wellbeing of these fundamental public safety officials. Speaking to a supervisor or a trained medical professional about personal mental and emotional challenges and insecurities can be intimidating. Having an option to talk to a trained peer can serve as a comfortable entry point for an individual to heal and potentially seek more help if needed.

Not only can SB 326 fortify these employees in a way that supports better outcomes for the community, but it can also create a team environment that relies on prioritizing mental health, trust, and support. There is a great deal of crossover between the corrections and law enforcement workforces, which is why considering their needs together will make them both stronger independent agencies.

As the rehabilitative arm of the justice system, corrections officers look out for and care for some of Maryland's most vulnerable populations, and are routinely exposed to situations that are damaging for mental health and wellbeing. They need and deserve resources and support systems to care for them, too. For these reasons, MACo urges a report of **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** for SB 326.