



POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: SB 286 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – Modifications

POSITION: SUPPORT

DATE: February 9, 2021

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests that the Senate Finance Committee Committee issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 286.

Few interventions promise to promote the efficacy, efficiency, and moral authority of Maryland's public safety system more than House Bill 108. Contrary to popular perception, at least 80% of [911 calls for service, arrests, and prosecutions](#) concern non-dangerous behaviors, often related to [mental illness](#) and [poverty](#). Yet, as it currently stands, Maryland relies on armed officers and the criminal legal system to address such conduct. This punitive approach is inhumane, inefficient, and ineffective. To solve this problem, House Bill 108 would increase funding for mobile crisis units. Moreover, the bill would require such units to take direction from the communities they serve, exhibit cultural competency, minimize law enforcement involvement, and connect citizens with appropriate community-based care. Accordingly, House Bill 108 would, in all likelihood, reduce officer-involved deaths and injuries, connect people with practitioners specifically trained to aid in problems they may be experiencing, and reduce unnecessary – and [highly costly](#) – arrests, prosecutions, and incarcerations.

It is long past time, in Maryland and beyond, to stop criminalizing poverty, mental illness, and imperfect human behavior. Our punitive paradigm fails to solve the problems it purports to address, is a waste of taxpayer money, and degrades the humanity of punishers and punished alike. Accordingly, enacting HB 108 is a critically important step towards bending the moral arc of the universe towards justice.

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For these reasons, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 286.