



February 9, 2021

**Senate Finance Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

SB 286 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services—Modifications

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. **Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 77,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.**

Behavioral Health System Baltimore is pleased to support SB 286 Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services—Modifications. Behavioral health crisis response services help countless individuals overcome life-threatening crises and reduces unnecessary Emergency Department (ED) use and police interaction for people in behavioral health crisis.

A comprehensive, integrated crisis response system is the backbone of any successful behavioral health system. It serves as the entry way to help individuals in need of care while reducing harm and overall costs for the system. Baltimore City is fortunate to have established some key behavioral health crisis response services; however, there are still gaps within Baltimore’s behavioral health crisis response system. Because of these system gaps, too often communities rely on hospitals and overuse law enforcement to respond to people in crisis.

In Baltimore City, the demand for critical behavioral health crisis services continues to increase.

- In FY 2017, Emergency Medical Services responded to 154,000 behavioral health crises calls, which is a 20 percent increase over the previous two years.
- During the same time 26,025 Baltimore City residents presented in hospital EDs for both mental health and substance use disorders.

The onset of the COVID pandemic has only exacerbated the need for behavioral health crisis services. Since April of 2020, Baltimore City’s 24/7 behavioral health crisis hotline saw a 500% increase in calls. Trained counselors respond to these calls, counseling people on the spot and helping people find treatment or other resources they need for themselves or someone else experiencing a crisis.

SB 286 makes modifications that align the Maryland Department of Health’s Behavioral Health Crisis Services Grant program with the nationally recognized [Crisis Now](#) model and federal best practices for behavioral health crisis services by requiring communities to minimize law enforcement interaction for individuals in crisis.^{1 2} This is achieved by expanding the use of 24/7 mobile crisis teams (MCT), which is a team including a licensed mental health professional and peer support specialist, to respond to people

¹ National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: Crisis Services Task Force. (2016). Crisis now: Transforming services is within our reach. Washington, DC: Education Development Center, Inc.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2020). National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care: Best Practice Toolkit. Washington, DC.

in crisis in the community, rather than having police respond. This type of systemic change to response to people in crisis, would support Baltimore City to address the behavioral health findings in the [2017 Baltimore City Consent Decree](#) with the Department of Justice.

In addition, SB 286 also supports implementation of the Greater Baltimore Regional Integrated Crisis System (GBRICS) Partnership, a \$45 million, 5-year grant funded through the Health Services Cost Review Commission to expand behavioral health crisis services in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Carroll County, and Howard County. The goal of GBRICS is to create a well-functioning behavioral health crisis response system that helps resolve crises quickly for individuals and families, meets people where they are comfortable, and provides appropriate care and support, while avoiding unnecessary police interaction, ED use, and hospitalization. This will also improve infrastructure and expand behavioral health crisis services to be available around the clock.

As the LBHA for Baltimore City, SB 286 allows BHSB to coordinate and leverage the Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services Grant program funding to expand crisis response services to better meet the increasing need for these services. **As such, BHSB urges the Senate Finance Committee to pass SB 286.**