

## SUPPORT SB 286 – Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services - Modifications

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM  
Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities



TO: Chair Dolores G. Kelley and Senate Finance Committee  
FROM: Bill Carlson and Jennifer Zito, MAJR Executive Committee  
DATE: February 5, 2021

The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR [www.ma4jr.org](http://www.ma4jr.org)) strongly supports SB 286 to enhance Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services in Maryland by providing grants targeted at creating crisis response teams which are **both mobile and available 24/7** while minimizing law enforcement interaction with individuals in crisis.

Currently police may be called to public places or homes to handle crisis situations created by individuals with drug or alcohol problems, abusive behavior, or mental illness.

- These situations often lead to criminal charges. Such charges are both expensive and often prevent addressing the underlying causes with effective treatment.
- In addition, these situations can escalate when police are involved, risking injuries or death (including to law enforcement).
- Crisis intervention teams, when deployed rapidly, have been effective in other states at addressing these problems.
- Such teams can free up police to respond to other calls.
- Studies of Maryland's pretrial system have estimated that at least 39% of local jail inmates suffer from mental health disorders (GOCCP 2016, p. 24 and p. 50). This portion could be reduced by programs developed under this bill.

**Evidence from Denver's STAR Program:** Denver city and county instituted a community program providing person-centric mobile crisis response for problems related to mental health, depression, poverty, homelessness, and/or substance abuse issues by diverting 911 calls to non-police trained responders. The program was evaluated in a January 2021 report (STAR 2021) which showed that the STAR program responded to 748 calls in a 6-month pilot period. Of those calls, 41% resulted in transporting individuals to either homeless services, walk-in crisis centers, or a hospital. While some were concerned that calls would ultimately require intervention by the criminal justice system, this concern proved unfounded: none of the 748 calls required assistance of the Denver Police Department and no individuals were arrested.

For these reasons, the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform urges you to support SB 286.

### References

Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention, [\*Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders Gaps and Needs Analysis\*](#), December 31, 2016.

STAR Program Evaluation, January 8, 2021, available at [https://wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/STAR\\_Pilot\\_6\\_Month\\_Evaluation\\_FINAL-REPORT.pdf](https://wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/STAR_Pilot_6_Month_Evaluation_FINAL-REPORT.pdf)