

January 19, 2021

House Committee on Health and Government Operations  
House Office Building, Room 241  
6 Bladen Street  
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Committee Members:

We are writing to you and submitting this letter as written testimony in advance of your hearing on February 2 in strong support of HB 108, the Mobile Crisis Units bill introduced by Delegate Charkoudian (and in the Senate by Senator Augustine as SB 286).

As members of the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church and in response to our understanding of the gospel, we are active in anti-racism work including efforts to redefine public safety and transform policing. Our church has an active Committed Racial Mindfulness group and also sponsors Presbyterians for Police Transformation. We realize that the movement for racial justice, including the much-needed transformation of policing in this country, requires a comprehensive approach, and that relieving police from responding to mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, and other community problems that do not involve crimes is a critical component of the change we need.

The Mobile Crisis Units bill will improve local governments' ability to respond to behavioral health crises with mental health professionals, rather than law enforcement. The bill proposes mobile crisis teams to prioritize limiting interactions between law enforcement and people in crisis, establishes expectations for cultural competency and language access as well as community services partnerships and peer support, and incorporates the authority for 911 to dispatch mobile crisis teams. Additionally, this bill establishes increased funding over the next several years, rising in stair steps to \$10 million in 2025. Importantly, the bill also strengthens data collection and evaluation, including disaggregated data by race, gender, age and zip code.

We have studied crisis response approaches in other jurisdictions, including the long-standing Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) crisis intervention team program in Eugene, Oregon, and the more recent decision of San Francisco to remove police from most calls about disruptive behavior tied to mental illness and substance abuse and instead to use crisis response teams. Closer to home, we are also impressed by Anne Arundel County's "warm line" alternative help call system.

We strongly support shifting a substantial portion of public funds now going to policing to non-policing services and interventions that are less dangerous, particularly to people of color, and more successful at de-escalation and preventing violence. This will help prevent the criminalizing of non-criminal behavior and address the real causes of a safety situation such as mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness.

Police are unfairly called upon to deal with many situations where policing is not the appropriate response. A big reason for that is inadequate funds for social service and medical systems to address these issues. In this country people in a mental health crisis are more likely to interact with police than treatment providers. Yet incidences of violence and death are much more frequent in these

police interventions. Too many people with serious mental illness and addiction end up in prison. Police budgets now are a huge portion of city and county budgets. We need to move a portion of this money from policing to other approaches.

We need a new model, one that pulls together the social service resources of the state, its counties and municipalities, and the non-governmental sector to re-envision our collective response to mental illness and human needs in our communities. We believe HB 108 is a very important step in the process of moving in that direction and we applaud Delegate Charkoudian and Senator Augustine for its introduction. We urge your support for the Mobile Crisis Unit bill and the improvements it would bring to public safety. In addition, we urge you to provide even more funding for crisis response teams and to transfer that funding from the current police budget.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

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