

Your Name: Mercer Epps-Stewart

Date of Hearing: Tuesday February 16th, 2021 at 1:30pm

Committee: Health and Government Operations

Sponsored by: Delegate Sheila Ruth

Bill Number: HB0537

Full Title of the Bill: Mental Health Law – Petitions for Emergency Evaluation – Procedures

Position: In Support of Passing HB0537/SB0398

I write today to share support for House Bill 0537 and urge our state legislators to vote in favor of its passing.

I think when everyone makes decisions, our fear; the most human instinct emotion tends to get overlooked. Fear of the unknown, fear of what's possible drives our decisions. It makes us human.

My struggle with mental health, in my own community is no secret. Most days that fear is small and manageable, overshadowed by a community coping with generations of unchecked trauma. I spent a lot of time as a kid out west on the frontier watching animals. I spent my isolation watching them get herded, corralled, and eventually slaughtered. When I think back to my interactions with police at the worst points of my life, when I was truly a danger to myself; it brings back memories of animals headed to the slaughterhouse. I was in the impossible position of trying to regain self determination through my own mortality.

When the police arrived, the memories of being pulled off busses in the fifth grade because I fit a description came flooding back, the instinctual fight or flight response that blue uniforms and shiny metallic badges had always invoked was at its most alert position. I had already decided at that point that there were better options to take, I was alone making my way home when they got to me. I was surrounded, and forcibly cuffed and sat in a car with the promise of “we’re just taking you to meet your parents”. Those first five minutes in the back of a police car were some of my most haunting experiences. I had been stripped of my right to self determination, my most fundamental promise as an American, my right to liberty had been stripped away from me. I felt like that cattle that had been herded and sent for slaughter.

Through my time in the mental health ring of therapy, hospitalization, medication, and being a functioning member of society- police have always at every step been seen as an unnecessary brutish force save for the most dire of cases, when they have been the deciding factor in what could have been bad outcomes.

This common sense bill gives those with more information the agency to stop, look at the facts with and come to a decision on the course of outcome most necessary and productive to a lasting resolution; protecting both those in crisis, and the officers. This current system of putting officers in the place of mental health professionals is untenable, and an unrealistic expectation to put on those tasked with safeguarding our communities.

As someone who has to deal with the lasting effects of police action when other, better courses were available, I urge a favorable report. Please support this bill. So we can start the process of affecting lasting change.