



LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTION PARTNERSHIP

ADVANCING JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY SOLUTIONS

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Date: February 11, 2021

Re: HB 537 - Mental Health Law - Petitions for Emergency Evaluations -
Procedures

Position: **SUPPORT**

To: The Maryland House Health and Government Operations Committee

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As a retired Major with the Baltimore Police Department and as a speaker for the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP), I am here to support HB 537. This bill would allow us to improve public safety by shifting some mental health responsibilities from police to mental health professionals.

During my 27 years of service with the Baltimore Police Department, I began as a patrolman in East Baltimore, I ran 911 and police dispatch, I served as assistant to the Chief of Patrol, and I retired as a Major in the Communications Section.

As a patrolman, I remember getting a call about a muscular young man who was off his medication, throwing bottles in an alley at anyone who approached him. My partner arrived first and the kid threw a bottle, and then picked up another, so my partner began preparing to use force. I arrived and just called out the kid's name, and he put the bottle down and let me handcuff him for an emergency petition. My partner was shocked to see his much smaller sidekick swiftly resolve the situation. But I had responded to the same kid before on a similar call, so we had an existing relationship.

Requiring police to handle mental health issues can be a recipe for escalation. When someone in crisis sees flashing lights and a police uniform, they become more agitated. I was not surprised to see in [a report from the Treatment Advocacy Center](#) that individuals with mental illnesses account for more than 25 percent of all police-involved shootings.

LawEnforcementActionPartnership.org

Formerly known as Law Enforcement Against Prohibition

Many mental health-related calls are better handled by specially trained behavioral health clinicians, paramedics, and peer counselors. Several cities already send civilians to appropriate 911 calls rather than police. They have never had a death or injury at one of these calls, because the trained civilians are skilled at de-escalation.¹ Over time, they develop existing relationships that make their work even easier, as I found with the young man throwing bottles.

I support HB 537 because it would stop requiring emergency petitions for mental health evaluations to be handled by law enforcement. It would allow people trained in mental health issues to handle these situations without calling in the police. It would free up police to focus on calls related to serious crime, for which we have been trained.

I believe this bill would help improve public safety in general by strengthening police-community trust. When police use force against someone in a mental health crisis, their family and community are likely to turn against the police. We rely on these families to report crime and collaborate with our officers. Community distrust has become one of the greatest barriers to improving safety on our streets. One of the best ways to avoid poisoning the well of community trust is to remove police from mental health-related situations where we are not necessary.

HB 537 would pave the way for Maryland to improve our crisis response system. We can equip skilled civilian responders to handle a large share of 911 calls currently on the shoulders of police. HB 537 is an important first step.

In sum, I believe that it is critical to allow people trained in mental health crises to handle emergency petitions without involving police. A career in policing has taught me that police cannot protect and serve alone -- our society needs to stop putting everything on our shoulders and start allowing partners to step in and help.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience in support of this bill.

Major Mike Hilliard (Ret.)
Baltimore Police Department, Maryland
Speaker, Law Enforcement Action Partnership

1. "The Community Responder Model - Center for American Progress." 28 Oct. 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/reports/2020/10/28/492492/community-responder-model/>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2021.