



February 16, 2021

**House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION**

HB 537 Mental Health Law - Petitions for Emergency Evaluation - Procedures

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 opposes HB 537 Mental Health Law - Petitions for Emergency Evaluation - Procedures. HB 537 would allow a range of mental health practitioners to transport an individual under Emergency Petition (EP) to an emergency room.

BHSB recognizes the intent behind this bill is to reduce police interaction when responding to people with a mental health crisis, however, the approach of having a non-officer transport for individuals under EP is misguided and could result in further harm to the individual in crisis and the practitioners involved.

For some, involuntary admission into treatment is an approach to help people in crisis and engage them into care. However, EPs should be used judiciously, reserved only for individuals with serious mental illness and who are a true danger to themselves and/or others.

To reduce police interactions with people in mental health crisis, we must have a comprehensive behavioral health system that includes robust crisis services to ensure that people get the care they need at the exact time they need it. Behavioral health crisis response services are an essential component of an effective emergency response system. Without them, people end up unnecessarily calling the police and using emergency medical services and hospitals. When used, Baltimore’s behavioral health crisis response system has helped countless Baltimoreans overcome potentially life-threatening crises.

We often take for granted our emergency response system – police, fire, and hospitals – to address these issues, but often they are not best suited for that specialized task. There must be broader, systemic investment in behavioral health crisis services and the other services people need. This is a shared obligation of the city and the state. Maryland’s system has been under-valued and under-resourced for too long.

As such, BHSB urges the Senate Finance Committee to oppose HB 537 and focus efforts on strengthening and expanding crisis response services to ensure immediate access to these life-saving urgent care services for people with mental illness crisis.