

Testimony for the House Health & Government Operations Committee
February 16, 2021
HB 537 - Mental Health Law - Petitions for Emergency Evaluation - Procedures

FAVORABLE

To Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Peña-Melnyk, and Committee members,

My name is Onyinye Alheri, and I am an advocate and social work student living in West Baltimore, in the 40th Legislative District. I am writing to express support of HB0537. This proposed bill would remove the language that mandates involvement of law enforcement in the deliverance of emergency petitions for mental health evaluations. Considering that individuals with mental illnesses account for over 25% of police-involved shootings, minimizing contact between law enforcement and vulnerable individuals in crisis will undeniably save lives.

People with an untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed in a police encounter than others, according to a [2015 study](#). It is important for us as concerned citizens and legislators to decouple policing from mental health and other social services, in order to provide the highest level of care to our most vulnerable neighbors.

In addition to the just and life-saving nature of this bill, it is also fiscally responsible. The bill requires no funding to implement and can save taxpayer dollars. The same study mentioned above also found that law enforcement officers spend an estimated \$918 million transporting individuals with severe mental illness each year, money which can instead go toward preventing mental health crises.

It is time for change in Maryland. Individuals in crisis deserve to be treated with dignity. **Community members and clinicians, not police officers, should be central in all emergency evaluation processes whenever possible.** Please, help move HB0573 forward and support this life saving bill.

Best,

Onyinye Alheri
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