



March 18, 2021

**Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

House Bill 271 Public Safety Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Programs

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority 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.**

BHSB is pleased to support HB 271 Public Safety Law Enforcement Diversion Programs as this legislation supports strong partnerships between local behavioral health authorities (LBHAs) and law enforcement agencies to develop and implement LEAD programs that align with national best practices for a behavioral health crisis system.

The LEAD program is an important diversion program that is part of Baltimore’s behavioral health crisis response system. As the LBHA for Baltimore City, BHSB partnered with the Baltimore Police Department to launch the LEAD program in Baltimore City in February 2017, making this the first LEAD program in the state of Maryland. LEAD is a voluntary pre-booking diversion program that allows officers to redirect low-level offenders engaged in drugs and/or prostitution activity to community-based behavioral health services, instead of jail and prosecution.

Since inception, 338 individuals avoided arrest and were instead enrolled in the LEAD program. In addition, LEAD has had the positive effect of improving police-community relations. LEAD has helped facilitate positive relationships between police officers and civilians as well as strong alliances between police and the behavioral health provider community, a needed development given the State’s opioid crisis.

The LEAD program is one tool to help people with substance use disorder access treatment and support services, however, this program should be implemented with a referral model that focuses in lieu of arrest and overdose response, as is outlined in HB 217. This type of referral model aligns the LEAD program with national behavioral health crisis system best practices, which urge communities to minimize law enforcement interaction for individuals with behavioral health conditions.¹

When implemented as part of the behavioral health crisis response system, the LEAD program can have a positive impact on communities and the lives of people with substance use disorders. **As such, BHSB urges the House Judicial Proceedings Committee to pass HB 271.**

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2020). National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care: Best Practice Toolkit. Washington, DC.