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POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: SB781/HB1018 - PUBLIC SAFETY AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENT ACT
FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender
POSITION: Favorable
DATE: March 7, 2022

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests that the Committee issue a favorable report on SB781/HB1018.

The effects of the opioid crisis on Marylanders is impossible to ignore. It is a startling awareness that the biggest provider of mental health services currently is our jail system; and that when families call 9-1-1 for help when a loved one is having a mental health crisis they get a police response instead of a mental health response. These are clear indications that our Behavioral Health Services system needs work. In the last few years Maryland has taken tremendous steps forward in this work by creating regional crisis centers and creating The Maryland Behavioral Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence. This year we are asking this body to continue on the road to improving our Behavioral Health Services and Justice Systems by funding the Center for Excellence. Without funding, the Center for Excellence cannot fulfil its mandate of leading the development of a strategic plan to increase treatment and reduce the detention of individuals with behavioral health disorders involved in the criminal justice system.

As an attorney who has been practicing for 22 years, I have represented people with mental illness I have seen many families call 9-1-1 for help when a loved one was in the midst of a mental health crisis, such as a psychotic break or a suicide attempt. These calls have traditionally been answered by police. Even the most well intended police officers lack the skills needed to deescalate these crises, leaving them to use the tool they are most familiar with - arrest. Usually these arrests are for charges like disorderly conduct, failing to obey a police order, and resisting arrest. While the intention may be to get an individual help, an arrest only complicates the situation and does not, in fact, help. Training 9-1-1 operators to divert calls for crisis assistance to crisis centers, rather than police, will have a real impact on Marylanders.

However, none of these steps forward can happen without funding. The health of Marylanders can only be improved by funding The Maryland Behavioral Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence, and so we urge you to issue a favorable report on this bill.

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