



SSJC TESTIMONY FOR THE FY25 OPERATING BUDGET

In summary, we ask that the Council:

- Increase utilization of MCOTs: mandate much-needed systemic changes to ensure that mental and behavioral health calls receive a health-centric, civilian-led response that eliminates police involvement to the greatest possible extent.
- Oppose funding for the expansion of the Drone First Responder program and the Real Time Information Center.
- As a condition of funding for MCPD security guards, MCPD provides assurances that the guards are not armed with guns.
- Fully fund the proposed MCPS budget, particularly to implement a robust restorative justice program in our schools.
- Strip from the MCPD and County's Legal budget any resources used to support or maintain the memorandum of understanding with the FOP that undermines Anton's Law. The Council should advise the Executive to terminate that MOU.
- Beyond our specific mental health crisis response and education asks, invest in social services as a public safety and well-being measure, rather than invest in police on the streets.

Since 2018, when Robert White, an unarmed Black man, was murdered by police, Silver Spring Justice Coalition (SSJC) has worked to reduce harm by law enforcement, especially to people of color and individuals living with mental health conditions.

I. MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS RESPONSE

At a February 5, 2024 worksession convened by the County Council's Health & Human Services and Public Safety Committees, officials discussed the urgent need and collective desire for a cohesive mental and behavioral crisis response system that consistently provides a *health-centered, civilian-led* response involving police only when and as necessary. A year and half later We urge the Council to consider the following recommendations, some of which were raised in that discussion:

- **Increase Utilization of Mobile Crisis Teams**

As a strong proponent of Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams (MCOTs), SSJC is concerned that the Council is enabling MCPD to hire mental health clinicians to support police, rather than expanding the HHS budget needed to hire more MCOT staff. For every mental health clinician who works for MCPD that's one less clinician to staff an MCOT. Particularly in this extremely tight budget, the Council should prioritize funding for MCOTs, rather than clinicians for MCPD. MCPD data indicates that police continue to respond to thousands of mental health-related calls. With police shortages, the County should not be paying ever larger overtime premiums for

police to respond to mental health crises. More MCOTs are needed so that MCPD can prioritize fighting crime, rather than responding to non-life threatening mental health crises.

- **Offer Competitive Compensation to Attract a Wider Range of Mental Health Staff**

As the nationwide demand for mental health services has grown, so has the number of providers who have left the field. This trend has meant too many vacant positions at the Crisis Center, including mobile crisis team staff. Just as the County offers generous salaries and stipends for public safety recruits, it must also offer competitive incentives to attract and retain clinicians, peer specialists and others who are essential to the county's crisis response.

We also urge the Council to expand the categories of professionals who can serve on MCOTs beyond social workers and peer specialists to include licensed marriage and family therapists and licensed clinical professional counselors. Doing so will fill positions more quickly. In Michigan, a community college created a certification program for community residents to be trained as peer counselors. The Council could fund a similar pilot program with Montgomery Community College.

- **Identify and Fix Systemic Weaknesses in the County's Crisis Response**

A staffing shortage is not the sole reason that police are too frequently the unwanted responders to mental health calls. The County's introduction of civilian-only crisis response and more mobile crisis teams has amounted to a profound shift in a complex system. As Councilmember Albornoz acknowledged at the February 5, 2024 worksession "we're building off of an infrastructure that we've established . . . but we still have a ways to go."

A few of the issues clogging the system include unclear and inconsistent protocols for call triage; insufficient role definition and coordination between MCOTs and police; slow MCOT response times; and incompatible technologies for call tracking at 911, 988, and the Crisis Center. All these problems have been acknowledged by the administration, but little has changed. We urge the Council to attach conditions on funding to fix these problems in the coming Fiscal Year.

Possible solutions for these and other systemic weaknesses were raised at the February 5, 2024 worksession and other convenings. We urge the Council to bear in mind these recommendations and make room in the budget for the following ways to address serious obstacles to an effective crisis response system:

- **Examine and adopt innovations and best practices from other jurisdictions.** As Earl Stoddard from the Executive's team noted at the February worksession and Councilmember Mink documented in the [staff report addendum](#), many successful initiatives have emerged in recent years. Examples from other systems include placing mental health specialists at 911 to help triage calls, and stationing mobile crisis teams in numerous locations to improve response times.

- **Involve untapped resources and partners**, including county behavioral health nonprofits as well as organizations that advise, staff and/or operate successful crisis response programs in other jurisdictions.
- **Institute more frequent, in-depth training across the entire crisis response system**. For example, include training on de-escalation and self-regulation to prevent responders from making snap judgments and resorting to force. Use training to support the implementation of clearly defined roles and protocols for MCOTs and police when they respond jointly to crisis situations.

- **Invest in a Public Education Campaign**

Public awareness is one of the greatest gaps in our crisis response system. Many community members are entirely unaware of crisis resources while others are confused about who to contact and what kind of response to expect. This confusion coupled with the fear of a police response stops people from seeking help. A public education initiative, particularly reaching those from marginalized communities, is essential to connecting people with care and preventing more serious crises.

- **Measure and Report Performance**

The Council should require the Executive to establish and report performance measures across the crisis response system, such as Crisis Center call volume, the number of calls to which MCOTs respond, the percentage of MCOT responses that have a police joint response, and feedback from residents. Capturing and reporting this data may require an investment in technology and staff time.

II. MONTGOMERY COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT BUDGET

- **We Oppose Funding for the Drone First Responder Program**

Since the Drone First Responder (DFR) program was proposed, SSJC has opposed this use of drones because the program unnecessarily surveils communities of color, notwithstanding the guardrails the Council imposed as part of its initial funding. The RESJ Statement on the original bill spoke to our concerns.

Our preliminary study of a sampling of actual DFR dispatches paints a very different picture than the cherry-picked handful of incidents in which the DFR program has been helpful. [SSJC Preliminary Study of DFR Program](#)

In addition to our general opposition to the use of MCPD drones, we refer you to our testimony on Surveillance Bill 4-25: [SSJC Testimony on Bill 4-25](#).

- **We Oppose Further Funding, at This Time, for the Real Time Information Center**

When the MCPD Real Time Information Center (RTIC) was initially proposed SSJC expressed concerns about the potential abuses of electronic and surveillance techniques, particularly as they may impact communities of color. While MCPD continues to ignore the racial disparities

that are rife in their policing practices and data, the RTIC is yet another so-called “tool” by which MCPD can surveil Black and Brown communities. We call for the Council to withhold further funding for the RTIC until, at least, Surveillance Bill 4-25 is adopted and Method 2 Regulations are adopted to ensure that appropriate guardrails around the RTIC are in place.

- **Reimagining the Use of Police Officers**

We know that some members of our community believe that there is an increase in crime that warrants an increase in the number of police officers, even though data shows a decrease in County crime in almost all major categories. Studies, however, have shown that incremental expansions in police forces do not reduce crime.¹

We saw that MCPD proposes a budget increase to provide for security guards in certain locations. We hope that the Council receives MCPD’s assurance that these security guards do not carry guns.

We urge the Council to demand that MCPD use more civilian-based staff, while holding down the need for gun-carrying officers who devalue human life. Mental health responses, discussed above, are just one area in which law enforcement responses can be replaced by civilian or automated responses. Civilian-based staff can be more cost effectively be used for some aspects of traffic enforcement and for calls for service involving drug use and homelessness. There are a range of non-violent, non-priority calls for service that could be responded to by people who do not carry guns or have the power to arrest people – people who will provide support, rather than pose a potential threat, to our most vulnerable community members. See Center for American Progress (CAP) and the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) analysis: [The Community Response Model](#).

- **We Oppose MCPD’s Increased Emphasis on Community Outreach**

The MCPD Community Resources Program budget component increases from \$6.9 million to \$7.55 million, almost a 9.5% increase – substantially more than the MCPD budget generally or the County budget. For Performance Measures, MCPD indicates they want to increase the number of community engagement events, even while they expect that the number of use of force incidents will increase. These priorities are exactly backwards: Community engagement events are ineffective recruiting and police feel good events that are not documented to prevent or solve crimes. Use of force incidents should be declining, not increasing. That, more than community outreach events, will demonstrate that officers are guardians not warriors. In this extremely tight budget, this is not the time to expand this program.

¹ For example, *When You Add More Police To A City, What Happens?* Greg Rosalsky, Planet Money (April 20, 2021). <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2021/04/20/988769793/when-you-add-more-police-to-a-city-what-happens> The article is a recap of a study done by Morgan Williams, an economist at NYU’s Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, and Chalfin, Hansen, and Weisburst of 1981 - 2018 FBI data from 242 cities. According to Rosalsky’s summary, the authors found that a new police officer prevents from .06 to .1 homicides per year, at an estimated annual cost of \$1.3 - \$2.2 million.

- **We Call Upon the Council to Strip Funding Used to Oppose Anton's Law**

The Council should strip from the MCPD and County's Legal budgets any resources used to support or maintain the memorandum of understanding with the FOP that undermines Anton's Law. The Council should advise the Executive to terminate that MOU. The Executive's memorandum of understanding with the FOP has given officers a preemptive opportunity to quash MPIA requests for police records, violates Anton's Law and provides the FOP with a platform to wrongfully argue that a properly enacted state statute is unconstitutional.

III. FULLY FUND MCPS PROPOSED BUDGET, INCLUDING ROBUST RESTORATIVE JUSTICE RESOURCES

- **We Call for Full Funding for Restorative Justice Programs in Our Schools**

We join the overwhelming call for fully funding the MCPD proposed budget, including full funding for Restorative Justice (RJ) programs in all schools. MCPS has demonstrated that with a robust RJ program, student misconduct can be significantly reduced and racial disparities in student discipline can also be significantly reduced. The County cannot afford to hobble the RJ program while still in its infancy, especially when it has shown so much promise.

Only a small percentage of schools believe they have a "mature" RJ program, which means that full staffing is needed to help publicize and make use of the benefits of the RJ program in each school. MCPS is taking an aggressive approach toward identifying hot spots, but without at least the same level of staffing and stipend funding provided in the FY25 budget, students will be suspended from school and then return only to engage in the same types of behaviors that led to their previous suspensions. RJ is one of the proven programs that help break that cycle of misconduct.

IV. MORE POLICE WON'T REDUCE CRIME. INVESTMENTS IN SOCIAL SERVICES WILL

Year after year, MCPD and Sheriff budgets go up. After decades of study in jurisdictions across the country, evidence that adding police reduces crime is inconclusive at best and we have concrete data about the harms the disproportionate impact of increased policing have on already marginalized communities. Instead, the County needs to invest in proven anti-crime measures that bring with them general public benefits: social services. In addition to the mental health crisis and school supports we have already mentioned, the County should look to outreach for youth, including after-school programming and summer jobs. Violence interruption programs such as the Street Outreach Network and drug treatment programs, as well as addressing basic needs such as shelter, food, and healthcare, will get at the root causes of crime while promoting health and well-being. At the same time, the County must increase its investment in non-police responses to people in crisis.