



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

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Testimony re Special Appropriation DHHS \$592,202 for Mobile Crisis Response
Hearing Date: July 7, 2020 at 1:30pm
From: Ziva Azhdam, Commissioner, Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee
Position: Support

Based on my experience, I believe it is imperative to have more social workers available for Mobile Crisis Response rather than relying on the police. With their extensive training and understanding of serious mental illness, social workers are much more likely to know how to talk to families and individuals in crises to avoid escalating the situation and help resolve the crisis without causing trauma or injury.

I have needed the services of the Montgomery County Mobile Crisis Team on several occasions when relatives were having a psychiatric crisis and needed hospitalization. Each time the Mobile Crisis Team told me that they could not help because of a lack of manpower and I should call the police.

My experience with the police officers, even those with Crisis Intervention Training, has often been traumatic.

After a long wait the police finally arrived but would not enter the house until a second police car arrived. That sometimes took an hour. Meanwhile, things were escalating and the individual having the psychiatric crisis was deteriorating. When the police did enter, their demeanor and the way they interacted with family and individuals in crisis spoke volumes about their lack of knowledge about mental illness.

One time my relative was agitated and could not immediately relax enough in order to be handcuffed before being taken to the hospital for an emergency evaluation. Instead of taking time to talk to my relative and calm him down, they got into a fight with him. I was terrified that they were going to kill him. Afterward I felt traumatized and was shaking for a long time after they took my relative to the hospital.

Other times, the police were very disrespectful to the family. On one occasion when I tried to explain the situation to the police officer, I was told to be quiet and that if I talked, they would handcuff me and take me to the police station. On another occasion, I was told in so many words that I must be a bad parent because I cannot control my adult child's behavior. The police officer said they were tired of coming to my home. A social worker would understand how

difficult it is for families to get treatment for an individual who does not comprehend that he is ill and needs treatment, and how hard families try.

On another occasion, the police officer could have easily petitioned my relative for an emergency evaluation. However, he refused to do so. I had to go to the commissioner's office at midnight. The judge agreed that the emergency petition criteria were met and granted the petition. Some of the police officers are not familiar with the statute that allows them to take into consideration information from others in making their decisions on emergency petitions.

All police officers, not just those who volunteer, should be required to take the 40-hour Crisis Intervention Training, since all encounter individuals with mental illnesses in their regular duties. However, 40 hours does not even closely compare to the training and experience of a licensed social worker.

If we want to reduce trauma and criminalization of those with serious mental illness and prevent tragedies, it would be best in most psychiatric crisis situations, to send **the mobile crisis team without a police officer.** This is in accordance with the National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which recommends MCT "Respond without law enforcement accompaniment unless special circumstances warrant inclusion, in order to support true justice system diversion."

I am writing this testimony because no family should be traumatized by a police officer like my family has experienced. Families and those with serious mental illness need the considerate help, knowledge, and experience that a social worker can provide. Therefore, please pass the Special appropriation for Mobile Crisis Response.

