

SIGN ON LETTER TO DECRIMINALIZE DISABILITY

We, the undersigned organizations and advocates, join together to ask that Baltimore City take urgently needed action to provide a response to our residents in crisis that promotes recovery and community integration over jail and institutionalization. We call for a comprehensive crisis system. Baltimore City has failed to make the critically necessary investment in a comprehensive, integrated response system. Without immediate access to crisis services, many people with behavioral health conditions end up in unnecessary, expensive inpatient care or involved with police – often with tragic consequences. The U.S. Department of Justice’s Letter of Findings issued to Baltimore City in August 2016 found that the Baltimore City Police Department violated the rights of people with disabilities by routinely using unreasonable force against individuals with disabilities and those in crisis, even when the individual committed no crime or was in restraints.

Incarcerating people with mental illness who need appropriate treatment and support services treats a public health problem through the criminal justice system and cannot be expected to produce positive outcomes. It can be expected to contribute to race and disability discrimination in our City, and to tear families and communities apart.

Best practice alternatives, including protocols to reduce police interaction with disabled people, and short-term crisis placements that avoid use of jails and hospitals, are necessary components of an integrated crisis response system and community-based infrastructure that will ultimately save money and lives, and begin to address the criminalization of disability and intersecting issues, including race discrimination.

Police are often the first to respond to incidents involving an individual in a behavioral health crisis. The use of force or handcuffs to respond to individuals with mental illness or substance use disorders frequently escalates the situation.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Instead of relying on police to be the first line of response, Baltimore must support the development of a comprehensive and integrated crisis response system. A crisis response system should be seen as an essential component for public safety and our health care system. Such a system engages behavioral health professionals and trained peers to respond to crises, and police only as necessary. The basic elements for a comprehensive crisis response system exist in Baltimore, but we need to create and support a fully functional system that can help people in crisis at any time. In a fully funded crisis response system, clinical social workers and experienced crisis line workers would respond to 911 calls involving individuals in crisis. These health care professionals would evaluate the situation and ensure people in crisis are connected to the services they need as quickly as possible. Baltimore could readily add

this component to its 911 call center and establish tracking mechanisms to report if an individual was diverted to a crisis center or emergency services.

Baltimore already has mobile crisis teams, but without adequate funding, they shut down at midnight for adults, and at 8 p.m. for youth. (This gap in service leaves us scratching our heads. What emergency first responders shut down for the evening?) Baltimore also has developed plans and partial funding for a stabilization center and sober homes. Such services should be developed as soon as possible and offer residential stabilization, service connections, medical support, peer engagement, and no waiting.

With such improvements in place, we would turn to police, incarceration and expensive hospital trips only as a last resort. Crisis alternatives save money, alleviate pressure on facilities and police, offer a path for people to move into recovery, take into account the trauma people in crisis have gone through, and produce better outcomes. Such services will also stem the legal rights violations identified by DOJ and thus are imperative at this time. Baltimore City must address these pressing issues.

Our approach for helping people with behavioral health crises is itself in poor health. The consequences for individuals and our communities have been devastating. People in crisis prefer hope, support and community over locked buildings and threats of force. It is time for a healthy response. We are eager to meet to discuss these issues and our ideas for remedial action as soon as possible. Please contact Disability Rights Maryland for further information.

Sincerely,

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