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,

Virginia Knowlton Marcus
Executive Director
Disability Rights Maryland

Susan Goering
Executive Director
ACLU-Maryland

Paul B. DeWolfe
Public Defender
Maryland Office of the Public Defender

Linda Raines
Chief Executive Officer
Mental Health Association of Maryland

Mike Finkle
Executive Director
On Our Own of Maryland

Jane Plapinger
Executive Director
Maryland Coalition of Families

John Nethercut
Executive Director
Public Justice Center

Antonia Fasanelli
Executive Director
Homeless Persons Representation Project

Kristine Dunkerton
Executive Director
Community Law Center

David Greenberg
President & CEO
The League for People with Disabilities

Dr. Christopher Smith, Director
Maureen van Stone, Esq., MS, Associate Director
Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities

Rebecca Nagle
Co-Director
No Boundaries Coalition

Jacqueline Robarge
Executive Director
Power Inside

Sharon Maneki
President
National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

Ken Capone
Public Policy Director
People on the Go
Bryan Pugh  
Executive Director  
Brain Injury Association of Maryland  

Cristy Marchard  
Executive Director  
The Arc Maryland  

Robert Strupp  
Executive Director  
Baltimore Neighborhoods, Inc.  

Michael Bullis  
Executive Director  
The IMAGE Center for People with Disabilities  

Jamey George  
Executive Director  
The Freedom Center  

Katie Collins-Ihrke  
Executive Director  
Accessible Resources for Independence  

Crosby King  
Organizer  
Maryland ADAPT  

Dale Eileen Meyer  
President/CEO  
People Encouraging People, Inc.  

Jason Woody, Executive Director  
Tommy Rice, Program Coordinator  
B'More Clubhouse  

Linda S. Morrell  
Program Coordinator  
On Our Own of St. Mary's Wellness and Recovery Center  

Ellen O'Neill  
Executive Director  
ASDEC - Dyslexia Therapy and Training
Lynnette Rodgers  
Community Arts Director  
Baltimore Clayworks  

Jennifer Engel Fisher, M.S.  
Director of Advocacy  
Weinfeld Education Group, LLC  

Sarah Davis  
Founder  
Parent Advocacy Consortium  

Sarah Tooley  
Director, 901 Arts  
Leadership Team, Showing Up for Racial Justice  

Michael Milleman  
Professor of Law  
University of Maryland Carey School of Law