

Testimony in support of HB1470 First Responders Mandatory Mental Health Training
Submitted by: Carol Liu, LCSW-C, mental health provider
Position: Support

Chair Luke Clippinger, Vice-Chair Vanessa Atterbeary, House Judiciary Committee Members—

Thank you for allowing me to submit this testimony in support of HB 1470, which would provide for essential mental health training for first responders.

I am an outpatient mental health provider, currently working with children and adolescents in Washington, DC and suburban Maryland. I also work at the Barker Adoption Foundation, providing post-placement support for adoptive families, including families who have adopted older children from foster care. Prior to the opening of my private therapy practice, I had a private law practice (I hold a JD as well as Master's Degree in Social Work) in which I worked exclusively as a guardian *ad litem* representing children in neglect cases in Washington, DC. Prior to that I worked as a therapist at The Lourie Center for Children's Social and Emotional Wellness, which focuses on providing outpatient therapeutic services to children under the age of twelve, specializing in children who have experienced trauma.

Thus for the past twenty-five years I have worked with children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. I cannot overstate how critical it is to have a basic understanding of how trauma can affect a person's functioning when attempting to interact with that person in an emergency or crisis situation. It is particularly critical given how *counterintuitive* the recommended responses to trauma can be.

This bill would provide for this critical knowledge to be given to first responders so that they are prepared to manage a crisis situation when interacting with someone who is affected by trauma or other mental illness. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has determined that the majority of adults have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience. Trauma is ultimately a subjective experience (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995), and traumatic stress can be difficult to identify. Thus first responders need to be familiar with the signs of traumatic stress and have an understanding of how to respond.

Most importantly, when a traumatic stress response occurs, the brain functions differently than when a trauma trigger is not present. Rather than operating with logic, language, and reason, the brain enters "fight/flight/freeze" mode when experiencing traumatic stress. This type of response centers in the limbic system and/or brain stem, not the frontal lobe which employs logic and reason.

Thus, intervention techniques and crisis response will be significantly different when interacting with a person who is affected by trauma. For example, simple directions may not be processed at all. A first responder may explain patiently what the person in crisis needs to do, but the person in crisis may not understand a word that is being said. This puts the first responder in a very difficult situation, given that their task is to manage the environment and restore safety. The trauma survivor's responses may pose a unique challenge to that first responder given how their brain is operating at that moment. Recommended interventions may be quite counter-intuitive to

a first responder, such as sensory based interventions (e.g., offering a sensory based comfort object, employing mindfulness techniques, calming breathing) that interrupt the fight/flight/freeze response and restore the trauma victim back to typical brain function.

There appears to be little disadvantage to providing first responders with information about how trauma affects brain functioning and recommended crisis intervention techniques for trauma survivors who are in the midst of a crisis situation. There are trauma-informed first responder training programs available that will address this area of practice. Because the majority of people have experienced trauma in some form, and because crisis situations are more likely to trigger a traumatic stress response, it makes the most sense that our first responders are equipped with the knowledge to provide trauma informed crisis intervention.