

Testimony in Favor of HB 1470

Submitted by: Danielle LeClair, University Park, MD

Position: Support

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of HB 1470, which would require each first responder and law enforcement officer in the state to complete certain mental health awareness training. I want to also thank the bill's lead sponsor, my delegate, Del. Nicole Williams, and the other bill sponsors.

This is difficult testimony to submit, because I want to protect my family's privacy – especially my young daughter's. But I feel that sharing a bit about the significant challenges we have faced when we have needed emergency response assistance will hopefully lead to positive change for families living with mental illness as well as helping first responders.

My 12 year old daughter and I live in University Park, MD. I adopted my daughter as a single parent almost three years ago from the foster care system. She is a smart and kind girl who has made Honor Roll almost every quarter, is a great athlete, plays the trombone in the school band, and loves animals, especially dogs.

She also has a number of significant mental health issues from the trauma she suffered in her birth and foster homes for the first 9 years of her life. What happened to her during those tragically abusive years which was in no way her fault. But she lives every day with the resulting trauma. And as her mom, so do I.

You may have heard that most trauma results in a person engaging in one of the following: flight, fight, or freeze.

Sometimes my daughter's trauma manifests as flight, where she will run out of the room when asked to do something seemingly simple that triggers her and reminds her of where she experienced her trauma in her birth home. We haven't needed to call 911 for that type of response.

But sometimes she freezes. One example is going from the car into our house, because in the past, she was safe in a car but harmed in her birth mother's house. An example of her "freezing" that required me to call 911 was one night last year when my daughter got very dysregulated – her brain and body just sort of shut down in our home and she was immobile. Once the EMTs and police arrived, she got scared. That's because in her birth home, she witnessed a great deal of domestic violence, and when she was removed from her birth mother, it was police who removed her, so seeing law enforcement can trigger her. Once the EMTs and police arrived, my daughter hid in my clothes hamper and got stuck. She froze up and was terrified and literally could not move. Thankfully, that night, the police and EMTs worked calmly for about a half hour and got her out of the hamper, but not without considering options such as calling a medic to sedate her first to get her out. So that's an example of when an emergency call for help went right.

But that night is unfortunately the exception.

I estimate that I have had to call 911 at least 15 times over the past 2 years when my daughter's PTSD has gotten triggered, typically resulting in her becoming dysregulated, disassociating, and sometimes getting violent as a result. Aka the "fight" response kicks in.

Well-intentioned EMTs and paramedics have told me every single time they arrived that they'd like to help, but had no training in mental health, including what to do when a child (or adult) was having a PTSD episode. They took cues from me from training I've received about how to help re-regulate my daughter. The last time paramedics were at our home several months ago, they actually asked me to lobby to get them mental health first response training because they said the request would have more of an impact coming from someone needing services, i.e. me, than from them. So here I am today asking you on my behalf and theirs to support HB 1470.

While my goal is to have EMTs/paramedics arrive when my daughter is having a mental health crisis, I understand that the protocol generally dictates that police are dispatched by the 911 operator as well. My family has had a much more challenging time with law enforcement in understanding mental health/PTSD episodes, despite state law mandating this training for LEOs after the tragic death of a young man with autism, Ethan Saylor of Frederick, a few years ago, and despite me immediately telling every single law enforcement officer who enters our home that my daughter is a child with a history of trauma who is having a PTSD episode.

She should be treated like a patient, not a criminal.

I've had police come to my home and tell me the following:

- "So you're just going to keep your kid on meds the rest of her life? What kind of life is that??" This was after I told a police officer that my child was having a bad PTSD episode because her psychiatrist had just changed her dose of medication and she was having a bad reaction. I seriously doubt that any law enforcement officer would say the same thing about medication if my daughter had asthma or diabetes.
- "She's really a handful, isn't she?" This comment is both disparaging and discouraging. Especially from a police officer who was also our town crossing guard at the time. Yes, my daughter has behavioral challenges, but I'd like our community to give us support and not demean her.

And there was one horrible event in April 2019. I can't even talk about it today, because it's just too upsetting. Police acted in a manner that was completely inappropriate, especially for a child with a known health condition (it was known because I told them before they came in our house, and from the 911 call). And EMTs misled me about what they could do, but thankfully I knew from the previous hamper experience that EMTs could in fact help my daughter, albeit in a way that required a specially trained medic to come.

A few days later, after I told the police that I was considering filing a misconduct/brutality charge against them for what they did to my daughter, the police retaliated by calling Child Protective Services to investigate me. I told CPS that in fact I'd welcome any help that they could provide to my daughter in addition to the weekly therapy, monthly psychiatry, equine

therapy and other resources that I have fought to get to help my daughter. I doubt many parents say that to CPS. But it is unconscionable that I was being investigated, and my daughter could have been removed from our family, because police were ill-trained to respond to a child's PTSD episode.

After that incident last April, I will not call police if my daughter has a PTSD episode in our home. Because I am afraid of what they will do to her. Their actions that night resulted in my daughter's recovery regressing significantly. Many other families of kids with PTSD have said the same thing to me – that they are afraid what police could do to their children, especially children of color, so they will just not call police or EMTs, because when you ask for a paramedic/EMT, often police come, too.

No parent of a child with a mental health issue should fear calling for help when their child is having a health emergency, including a PTSD episode. Imagine not feeling like you can call 911 when your child has another kind of health crisis like an asthma attack or a diabetes incident; parents of kids with mental health issues should feel just as comfortable calling 911 as those of kids with physical health issues.

If the police – and EMTs – had just been trained in how to deal with a child with PTSD, my daughter would have learned she could trust the police, and not fear them. She could have learned that EMTs can actually help her and not stand idly by.

I do want to say that I am extremely grateful to University Park Police Chief Harvey Baker, who worked with my family after the incident last year to better understand children's mental health issues. He not only sent our town's police officers to mental health training last year, but he also instituted a new protocol with the help of our wonderful Town Councilwoman Laurie Morrissey about police relations with children with mental health.

Ensuring that all first responders – 911 operators, law enforcement officers, and paramedics/EMTs – have training in mental health awareness training will mean that just like parents of kids with physical health conditions like asthma, epilepsy, and diabetes, my child will get the help she needs in an emergency.

HB 1470 will help all first responders by ensuring that they understand to treat mental health emergencies like the health issue that they are – not like a crime. The bill will help families suffering from mental illness by giving us the security that if we have to call 911, we will be helped and not harmed.

I hope that you will move quickly to a vote in favor of this important bill and to support other legislation to help families struggling with mental health issues.

Thank you.