

Bill: SB286

Re: Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services - Modification

Position: FAVOR

For some time Maryland has had a Behavioral Health Crisis Response System designed to address emergency behavioral health needs of individuals in the community. Though the program has provided valuable services, it is limited without more specific guidelines to address gaps in the system and plans and financing for growth and expansion. A robust Behavioral Health Crisis System is critical to assuring that behavioral health emergencies are managed with evidence-based clinical skill and compassion, rather than fear and force, and that all communities are equally afforded the benefit of its services.

It is frustrating and heartbreaking to hear when a family member, believing it is the only alternative, calls the police for help in managing a mentally ill relative in crisis. Sadly, it is not uncommon that the "help" results in handcuffs and charges for assault on a police officer; a very ill individual ends up in the place least likely to be of any help whatsoever, and the next professional most likely to become involved is a Public Defender rather than a Mental Health Clinician. Evidence-based behavioral health crisis intervention, rather than law enforcement involvement could prevent this predictable scenario.

Senate Bill 286 will assure that the local health departments administering the crisis response programs will adopt standards that minimize law enforcement involvement, assure cultural competency, and involve the community in what is, in fact, a community issue. Additionally, the bill provides for a transparent and coherent means to collect data and assess program effectiveness. Most importantly, this bill is a further step in addressing mental illness and substance use issues as health problems not crimes.

The Office of the Public Defender endorses this bill and urges a favorable report.

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