

April 20, 2022

Dear Council President Albornoz and Council Members,

We are in a mental healthcare crisis. Your urgent action is needed, as if this were a hurricane, earthquake, or pandemic. Eliminating all barriers to funding and staffing ample mental healthcare for all of our residents must be your priority.

You have heard from me often about the need for full funding for mobile crisis teams, 24/7, available throughout the county. We've made some progress and I appreciate the work that HHS has done to shift towards a mental health driven model. Still, last July Ryan Leroux, a young Black man who was depressed and harming no one, was killed by MCPD. No crisis team was called. The police took the life of a young man in need of compassion and care.

Even with a state of the art crisis program that is fully staffed and operational, Black, Brown, and immigrant members of our community remain at risk of death by police when they are experiencing a mental health crisis. Until we have new leadership at MCPD and an observable commitment to get on board with the new crisis model, the risk of a fatal encounter with a county police officer will remain. I see no such commitment or action towards this goal. That should be a source of grave concern and urgency for each one of you. It is shameful that Ryan died and it is shameful that MCPD continues to use force with impunity.

With the increased demand for mental health services and increased difficulty in finding and paying for mental healthcare, many treatable mental health illnesses will become crises. We will need more crisis teams than the 5 or 6 that are currently operational. I ask that the county fund a total of 13 teams in the 2023 budget.

Here's what the county must do to bring down the barriers to staffing and access. I urge you to put the necessary funds behind these recommendations, even if it means raising taxes.

- Revamp the county HR department so that it has the freedom and flexibility to respond to the mental health crisis in our community and in our schools.
- Develop pipelines to staffing with all regional university counseling, social work, marriage and family therapy, school counseling, expressive arts therapy, play therapy, and psychology programs to bring paid interns, fellows, pre-professional, and licensed graduate professionals into our community and schools. Offer competitive pay and generous benefits such as help with finding housing, help with paying off student loans, mentorships, and supervision.

- Waive licensure requirements for graduate pre-professionals who are on their way to licensure, as well as those with a bachelors degree, if they bring valuable linguistic and cultural knowledge and understanding to our students and community members.
- Likewise, develop similar relationships with regional university nursing programs to draw the psychiatric nursing staff we need in our hospitals and clinics. Offer competitive pay and attractive benefits.
- Advocate at the state level to require insurance providers to pay therapists at a level comparable to at least the lower level of their private pay colleagues.
- Advocate for your colleagues on the DC Council to sign the Counseling Compact and for MD to join all licensed mental health professional compacts that give immediate reciprocity to those licensed in other states. Because MD is a member of the Compact, if DC passes the Counseling Compact, licensed providers from 9 other states can come to work immediately in Montgomery County.
- Finally, fund non-profits to provide community-based and school-based peer mental health support. These organizations can gear programs to particularly vulnerable individuals and to immigrant and faith communities that may not go to a therapist, or one who is not familiar with their language or culture or faith. Let's not leave anyone behind and let's treat mental healthcare as a basic human need that requires the full support of our county government.

Sincerely,

Naomi Nim, Ed.D., LPC, NCC, BC-DMT
Silver Spring