

TESTIMONY of Mary Jacksteit on Bill 43-23 Crisis Intervention Team

January 16, 2024

I am a member of an advocacy group at the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church called Presbyterians for Police Transformation. We are members of the Silver Spring Justice Coalition and fully support and identify ourselves with its position opposing this crisis response legislation, Bill 43-23. We strongly believe that the county's focus should be on significantly strengthening and growing the existing civilian crisis response program in DHS - the Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams - so that police involvement can be reduced to where it is actually essential. This bill does not do that and in fact could have the opposite effect. SSJC has provided you with persuasive arguments and supporting data for why civilian response is the best, most effective and humane way to work with those having mental health crises except where safety requires police involvement. We have nothing to add but our conviction that the Bill before you is not at all the legislation we need.

Having said that I want to switch voices for the rest of my testimony. I am also the mother of someone I consider a highly credible person on the issues presented by this Bill. My adult son has serious bipolar and anxiety disorders but he has been committed to working in the mental health field as much as he can. For six years, until June 2021, he worked as a peer specialist on an ACT team (assertive community treatment) for five of those years here in our county for Cornerstone Montgomery. While ACT teams do not do crisis response per se, as therapists, nurses and peers they work with severely mentally ill homeless people to get them housed and to support their remaining housed and safe, and crises situations are common. Most if not all of this population has interacted at one time or another and often multiple times with crisis teams and police.

My son and I have discussed the merits of combined police-therapist crisis response as opposed to all-civilian response and he is adamant about the preferability of avoiding as much as possible police presence in situations where mental illness is presenting very challenging behavior. In his work he observed and heard common negative reactivity to police by many of his team's clients, and of their desire and efforts to avoid police. In contrast he saw up close how his team members could deescalate situations, identify and address triggering factors and credibly communicate and demonstrate genuine caring. Especially important to the discussion of this Bill, he also experienced the value of his presence as a peer specialist on the team especially in gaining trust and receptivity to help. He could connect with difficult-to-reach people because of his personal approach, his empathy and ability to listen, and his own understanding of what works from his life experience. This contribution was recognized and highly valued by his team members. The absence of peers on CITs is a significant disadvantage compared to civilian teams.

The urgent need to strengthen the County's crisis response capacity is a worthy motive of the sponsors of Bill 43-23 but we urge you to shift your focus and reorient this effort to building civilian crisis response. That is the needed priority.

I appreciate this opportunity to share these perspectives.