

**Testimony in Support of Bill 43-23 – Crisis Intervention Team
by Gino Renne
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I am here today on behalf of the members of UFCW Local 1994 MCGEO to express our support for Montgomery County Council Bill 43-23, which seeks to formalize the operation of Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) in our community. We believe that the formalization of the use of such teams is crucial for the well-being of our residents in crisis and the overall improvement of behavioral health services and public safety in Montgomery County.

Having heard from our members working in the County Department of Health and Human Services who are front-line service providers for individuals in crisis, we know that specialized Crisis Intervention Teams can make a significant difference. By providing proper training to crisis counselors, law enforcement and first responders, we can ensure they are better equipped to handle situations involving individuals in crisis with empathy, understanding, and de-escalation techniques.

It's important to note that our members employed by HHS did not go into their work looking to be law enforcement officers, and when the county removed the law enforcement support from crisis response a few years ago, many expressed their apprehension about responding to situations when they felt they would be in danger, unaccompanied by a law enforcement officer who could help protect them.

We understand that the presence of law enforcement can cause fear for individuals in crisis, but the goal of the CIT is to respond when there is a significant risk of danger to the public and to our first responders. They will not be asked to respond to every single crisis.

Yes, HHS crisis counselors are first responders who are in harm's way every time they respond to a call. A CIT that is properly trained and equipped may hopefully enhance their safety. Furthermore, properly funded CITs can foster collaboration between law enforcement, behavioral health professionals, and community organizations. This collaborative effort can lead to more effective responses to crises related to mental health, behavioral health and substance use disorder, by diverting individuals away from the criminal justice system and towards the appropriate support services they need.

As you well know, behavioral health issues have reached crisis levels in our nation. Montgomery County is not exempt from the crisis. Societal pressures related to Covid and various other issues have exacerbated health problems. It's time for our political leaders to adequately and appropriately fund the services and programs necessary to address this crisis.

Unfortunately, as a county, we are notorious for forming “advisory committees” and setting up programs with the best intent. Then we fail to implement and fund the good ideas emerging from these committees. We hope that this does not happen with this bill.

We support the bill in its concept and are committed to continuing to work with Councilmember Luedtke and her staff to assure that we build out an effective CIT program that meets the intent of this bill. We know that properly investing in mental health resources is an investment in the safety and well-being of our community and the employees who engage in this work. I urge you to support Bill 43-23 and allocate funds necessary to establish and maintain Crisis Intervention Teams in Montgomery County as well as a robust network of alternatives to use in lieu of the criminal justice system when dealing with individuals in crisis.

Thank you for your dedication to the welfare of our community.