



SSJC REQUESTS FOR FY25 OPERATING BUDGET

In summary, we ask that the Council:

- Expand crisis response services, instituting much-needed systemic changes to ensure that mental and behavioral health calls receive a health-centric, civilian led response that eliminates police involvement to the greatest possible extent.
- Oppose funding for the expansion of the Drone First Responder program.
- Eliminate police presence in our schools.
- Invest resources to implement a robust restorative justice program in our schools.
- Beyond our specific mental health crisis response and education asks, invest in social services as a public safety and well-being measure, rather than invest in police on the streets.

Since 2018, when Robert White, an unarmed Black man, was murdered by police, Silver Spring Justice Coalition (SSJC) has worked to reduce harm by law enforcement, especially to people of color and individuals living with mental health conditions.

I. MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS RESPONSE

At a February 5th worksession convened by the County Council's Health & Human Services and Public Safety Committees, officials discussed the urgent need and collective desire for a cohesive mental and behavioral crisis response system that consistently provides a *health-centered, civilian-led* response involving police only when and as necessary. We urge the Council to consider the following recommendations, some of which were raised in that discussion:

- **Increase Mobile Crisis Teams**

As a strong proponent of Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams (MCOTs), SSJC is pleased that the Executive has proposed two additional teams. Nevertheless, we urge the Council to fund even more MCOTs so that specialized health professionals are the primary responders to *every call* in which someone needs mental or behavioral health support. That constitutes 19% of calls to ECC 911— an average of 138 each day.¹ Seven mobile crisis teams will clearly not be sufficient.

- **Offer Competitive Compensation to Attract a Wider Range of Mental Health Staff**

As the nationwide demand for mental health services has grown, so has the number of providers who have left the field. This trend has meant too many vacant positions at the Crisis

¹ [OLO analysis](#) revealed that MCPD classified 2.3% of dispatched calls as “mental health situations.” [A Vera Institute analysis](#) found that though departments identified only 2% of calls as behavioral health-related, in fact 19% fall under an “expansive behavioral health” need and can best be answered by civilian-only MCOTs, rather than requiring an armed law enforcement officer.

Center, including mobile crisis team staff. Just as the County offers generous salaries and stipends for public safety recruits, it must also offer competitive incentives to attract clinicians, peer specialists and others who are essential to the county's crisis response.

We also urge the Council to expand the categories of professionals who can serve on MCOTs beyond social workers and peer specialists to include licensed marriage and family therapists and licensed clinical professional counselors. Doing so will fill positions more quickly.

- **Identify and Fix Systemic Weaknesses in the County's Crisis Response**

A staffing shortage is not the sole reason that police are too frequently the responders to mental health calls. The County's introduction of civilian-only crisis response and more mobile crisis teams has amounted to a profound shift in a complex system. As Councilmember Albornoz acknowledged at the February 5th worksession "we're building off of an infrastructure that we've established... but we still have a ways to go."

A few of the issues clogging the system include unclear and inconsistent protocols for call triage; insufficient role definition and coordination between MCOTs and police; slow MCOT response times; and incompatible technologies for call tracking at 911, 988, and the Crisis Center.

Possible solutions for these and other systemic weaknesses were raised at the February 5th worksession and other convenings. We urge the Council to bear in mind these recommendations and make room in the budget for the following ways to address serious obstacles to an effective crisis response system:

- **Appoint one leader to oversee coordination, improvement, and consistency among the system's many parts**, including the Crisis Center, ECC 911, 988, MCPD's CIT Unit, and hospital emergency departments, and others.
- **Examine and adopt innovations and best practices from other jurisdictions.** As Earl Stoddard from the Executive's team noted at the February worksession and Councilmember Mink documented in the [staff report addendum](#), many successful initiatives have emerged in recent years. Examples from other systems include placing mental health specialists at 911 to help triage calls, and stationing mobile crisis teams in numerous locations to improve response times.
- **Involve untapped resources and partners**, including county behavioral health nonprofits as well as organizations that advise, staff and/or operate successful crisis response programs in other jurisdictions.
- **Institute more frequent, in-depth training across the entire crisis response system.** For example, include training on de-escalation and self-regulation to prevent responders from making snap judgments and resorting to force. Use

training to support the implementation of clearly defined roles and protocols for MCOTs and police when they respond jointly to crisis situations.

- **Invest in a Public Education Campaign**

Public awareness is one of the greatest gaps in our crisis response system. Many community members are entirely unaware of crisis resources while others are confused about who to contact and what kind of response to expect. This confusion coupled with the fear of a police response stops people from seeking help. A public education initiative, particularly reaching those from marginalized communities, is essential to connecting people with care and preventing more serious crises.

- **Measure and Report Performance**

Require the Executive to establish and report performance measures across the crisis response system, such as Crisis Center call volume, the number of calls to which MCOTs respond, the percentage of MCOT responses that have a police joint response, and feedback from residents. Capturing and reporting this data may require an investment in technology and staff time.

II. MONTGOMERY COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT BUDGET

- **We Oppose the Almost \$8.2 million Increase in the Chief's Line Item**

There is no justification for an 8.2 million dollar increase in the MCPD Chief's line item. The budget explanation states only that it covers: "Multi-program adjustments, including negotiated compensation changes, employee benefit changes, changes due to staff turnover, reorganizations, and other budget changes affecting multiple programs."

SSJC continues to believe that any additional funding to address public safety should be targeted to non-policing services such as mental health, restorative justice, wrap-around youth violence prevention services, drug treatment, affordable housing, etc.

- **We Oppose Funding for the Drone First Responder Program**

Since the Drone First Responder program was proposed, SSJC has opposed this use of drones because the program unnecessarily surveils communities of color, notwithstanding the guardrails the Council imposed as part of its pilot funding. The RESJ Statement on the original bill spoke to our concerns. In addition to our general opposition to the use of drones by county police, we believe it is premature to consider funding an expansion to the program before the initial pilot has been thoroughly evaluated and vetted with the communities that are the subjects of the proposed extension. Therefore, we oppose the addition of \$773,500 for the program expansion.

- **Reimagining the Use of Police Officers**

We know that some members of our community believe that there is an increase in crime that warrants an increase in the number of police officers. But studies have shown that incremental expansions in police forces do not reduce crime.²

We urge the Council to fund innovative programs that explore more civilian-based responses. Mental health responses, discussed above, are just one area in which law enforcement responses can be replaced by civilian or automated responses. Traffic enforcement is another significant area, as are calls for service involving drug use and homelessness; calls that often fall into the "nuisance" category. There are a range of non-violent, non-priority calls for service that could be responded to by people who do not carry guns or have the power to arrest people – people who will provide support to, rather than pose a potential threat to, our most vulnerable community members. See Center for American Progress (CAP) and the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) analysis: [The Community Response Model](#).

- **We Oppose MCPD's Increased Emphasis on Community Outreach**

Last year MCPD's Community Resources Bureau received a significant budget increase of \$2 million, a 36% increase. For FY25 there is a very modest decrease of \$476,000 (the other \$151,000 decrease is merely a transfer to another part of the budget). The FY25 proposed budget estimates 280 community events, which is almost one per day. We reject the argument that the more interactions police have with communities, the more trust communities will have in them and the safer those communities will be. MCPD community outreach is all too often merely a recruiting event staffed by sworn officers. Instead of using police to solve crimes and keeping our communities safe, we're using taxpayer dollars for police to stand behind tables and pass out brochures. We ask: Why not just focus on eliminating use of force and competently performing core activities such as addressing and solving crime? That, more than community outreach events, will demonstrate that officers are guardians not warriors.

III. REPLACE CEOs WITH ROBUST RESTORATIVE JUSTICE RESOURCES

- **We Oppose Funding for Community Engagement Officers (CEOs)**

Alongside student advocate groups such as Young People for Progress and Racial Justice NOW!, we continue to oppose the Community Resource Bureau's CEO 2.0 program in our schools, and we ask the Council to trim MCPD's current budget of 23 CEOs to a level that more thoughtfully reflects the school clusters with the greatest needs. Where every officer is needed

² For example, *When You Add More Police To A City, What Happens?* Greg Rosalsky, Planet Money (April 20, 2021). <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2021/04/20/988769793/when-you-add-more-police-to-a-city-what-happens> The article is a recap of a study done by Morgan Williams, an economist at NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, and Chalfin, Hansen, and Weisburst of 1981 - 2018 FBI data from 242 cities. According to Rosalsky's summary, the authors found that a new police officer prevents from .06 to .1 homicides per year, at an estimated annual cost of \$1.3 - \$2.2 million.

to combat crime, using CEOs to serve as good-will ambassadors for students is a poor use of taxpayer dollars.

We were shocked to hear the police chiefs tell the PAB that they consider the CEOs' primary role as serving as role models, especially for students who don't have significant parent relationships, and that the CEOs' job is to build rapport with students.

The most recent data has shown a significant decrease in the number of school-based student arrests, much of that improvement is due to MCPS' efforts to handle student misconduct without police intervention. The need for police to intercede in school disciplinary matters does not justify having 23 MCPD officers and 1 deputy sheriff dedicated full-time to responding to school-based disciplinary matters, especially when police intervention has been proven to swell the schools-to-prison pipeline, and school-based arrests are so overwhelmingly racially motivated and discriminatory against students with disabilities.

- **We Call for Full Funding for Restorative Justice Programs in Our Schools**

We call for the Council to restore \$300,000 to the MCPS budget specifically for Restorative Justice (RJ) program implementation. MCPS has demonstrated that with a robust RJ program, student misconduct can be significantly reduced and racial disparities in student discipline can also be significantly reduced. The County cannot afford to hobble the RJ program while still in its infancy, especially when it has shown so much promise.

Only a small percentage of schools believe they have a "mature" RJ program, which means that full staffing is needed to help publicize and make use of the benefits of the RJ program in each school. MCPS is taking an aggressive approach toward identifying hot spots, but without at least the same level of staffing and stipend funding provided in the FY24 budget, students will be suspended from school and then return only to engage in the same types of behaviors that led to their previous suspensions. RJ is one of the proven programs that help break that cycle of misconduct, and we ask for this small restitution of MCPS' budget.

IV. MORE POLICE WON'T REDUCE CRIME. INVESTMENTS IN SOCIAL SERVICES WILL

Year after year, MCPD and Sheriff budgets go up. After decades of study in jurisdictions across the country, evidence that adding police reduces crime is inconclusive at best and we have concrete data about the harms the disproportionate impact of increased policing have on already marginalized communities. Instead, the County needs to invest in proven anti-crime measures that bring with them general public benefits: social services. In addition to the mental health crisis and school supports we have already mentioned, the County should look to outreach for youth, including after-school programming and summer jobs. Violence interruption programs such as the Street Outreach Network and drug treatment programs, as well as addressing basic needs such as shelter, food, and healthcare, will get at the root causes of crime while promoting health and well-being. At the same time, the County must increase its investment in non-police responses to people in crisis.

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