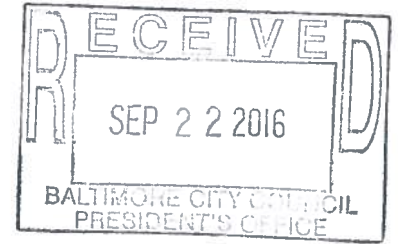




Behavioral Health System
Baltimore



September 22, 2016

The Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
Room 409, City Hall
100 North Holliday Street
Baltimore, MD 21202

RE: City Council Bill No. 16-0313R- Informational Hearing- Homeless Outreach Efforts

Dear President and City Council Members:

On August 15, 2016 the Baltimore City Council introduced City Council Resolution 16-0313R requesting that Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) along with other City agencies discuss the current availability and need for street outreach services for homeless persons in Baltimore City.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization responsible for managing Baltimore City's public behavioral health system—the system of care that provides behavioral health and wellness services for individuals with substance use and mental health disorders. Baltimore City's network of community-based providers deliver a range of services, including prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery services, to over 65,000 people annually, who are Medicaid/Medicare recipients or are uninsured. Persons experiencing homelessness can benefit from mainstream services within the public behavioral health system. However, targeted homeless outreach services are critical to connecting vulnerable persons to life-changing resources, including treatment for a substance use disorder or mental illness and permanent housing.

In FY16, BHSB received \$246,019 from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) for targeted homeless outreach services. BHSB contracts with two community-based providers for homeless outreach services: 1) People Encouraging People (PEP) and 2) Health Care for the Homeless (HCH). With funding from BHSB, PEP employs five (5) homeless outreach workers and HCH employs one (1).

The Mayor's Office of Human Services (MOHS) oversees homeless outreach efforts for the City and as such, serves as the first point of contact for requests for homeless outreach services across the city. MOHS collaborates with BHSB and other providers to coordinate ongoing services for people engaged through homeless outreach services.

Homeless outreach workers are the front line of response when a vulnerable person living outdoors is identified by a constituent, health care worker, police officer, or business, particularly in severe weather situations. These outreach workers connect persons to benefits, health services, and temporary and permanent housing programs. A homeless outreach worker's ability to connect people experiencing homelessness to services largely depends on

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relationship and trust. In some cases, outreach workers spend months or even years building the trust needed to encourage vulnerable persons to consent to services. In addition to difficulties with building trust with homeless individuals, workers are faced with systemic barriers, such as the lack of affordable housing and limited availability of support services, which can hinder connecting persons to care.

Targeted homeless outreach resources have been particularly scarce since, May 2016, when federal funding cuts reduced citywide full-time outreach positions from 14 to 7. The remaining 7 positions continue to receive federal funds, but 5 of these positions are at risk of future cuts. Consequently, at the current staffing levels, response times are slow, evening and weekend availability is scarce, and existing clients are seen less frequently, which prolongs individuals' homelessness.

MOHS convened a workgroup to assess the gaps in homeless outreach services and consider how to expand these services in Baltimore City. Given the growing number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, the workgroup estimates that 24 outreach workers are needed to better support outreach and engagement efforts across the City. BHSB looks forward to continuing to work with partners in this workgroup to address this critical gap in resources for homeless outreach services.

Thank you for consideration of our testimony.

Sincerely,



Kathleen Westcoat
President and CEO
Behavioral Health System Baltimore