



June 15, 2021

Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
City Hall, Room 400
100 N. Holliday Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

**RE: City Council Bill 21-0039R
Violence Against Women – An Overlooked Public Health Crisis**

Dear Council President Mosby and Members of the City Council:

The Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) has reviewed City Council Bill Resolution 21-0039R, which seeks to invite agency leaders and community-based organizations to discuss "the rise in violence against women and what strategies are being put in place to reverse this epidemic."

Agency Position: Support

MONSE supports the passage of City Council Resolution 21-0039R. MONSE is deeply concerned about the increase in violence against women and committed to preventing intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and community violence. Reducing violence against women will require a collaborative approach which utilizes evidenced-based indicators and tools to assess the risk of homicides and connects victims at elevated risk of lethal violence to immediate crisis intervention, ongoing advocacy, and referrals to comprehensive services. We welcome this conversation about how city agencies and community partners can adopt a trauma-informed, healing-centered, and partnership-based approach to preventing violence and co-producing public safety.

Intimate Partner Violence

Numerous recent studies have confirmed what domestic violence experts feared about the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) and its victims nationwide. The pandemic has fostered increases in a range of stressors including unemployment, financial instability, and parental stress; all of which are associated with IPV. Rising tensions and persistent confinement as the result of stay-at-home orders can be a pressure cooker for explosive behaviors resulting in increased exposure to serious harm or death.

Historically and absent a pandemic, IPV victims are often hesitant or reluctant to reach out for services or contact law enforcement for fear that nothing will be done or fear that something will be done that is averse to their wishes and/or cause further harm and instability for their family. Bystanders often contemplate whether to support a victim's desire to seek services, particularly in communities of color. Systemic racism, fear of oppressive behavior, or simply not being believed have been contributing factors as to why victims of color state they do not seek assistance and simply "endure."

Due to the rising frequency and severity of abuse occurring since the start of the pandemic, Baltimore City is seeing a change in the help-seeking behaviors of victims. A recent academic analysis comparing law enforcement and emergency hotline calls for domestic violence during COVID-19 (March 9, 2020-October 31, 2020) for seven jurisdictions reflects that there has been a sustained increase in both domestic violence related calls for service to police per day and domestic violence related emergency hotline calls

per day for Baltimore. In fact, Baltimore was one of only two cities to see an increase in both IPV-related police calls for service and IPV-related emergency hotline calls.

These concerning trends demand a strong coordinated community response and dedicated workgroup in Baltimore City focused on analyzing IPV efforts. Reducing IPV homicides requires increasing awareness and coordination between survivors and agencies focused on minimizing risk and increasing safety, as well proactive measures to ensure that the systems focused on offender accountability are synchronized.

Recognizing the need for more robust and coordinated responses to violence against women in Baltimore, MONSE applied in March for a grant from the Office on Violence Against Women in partnership with the Baltimore Police Department, House of Ruth, and Mercy Medical Center. We will be notified in October 2021 if we will be awarded \$750,000 to support a multi-disciplinary team focused on reducing intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual assault, and dating homicides.

MONSE is also working to reconstitute the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). Until the CJCC was disbanded in 2017, the Domestic Violence Coordinating Council was arguably its most productive committee. A domestic violence committee will be among the first CJCC committees established, with the goals of 1) increasing the capacity of Baltimore City to identify and respond to domestic violence risk factors across multiple pathways; 2) improving the City's efforts to reach more high-risk victims of domestic violence and connect them to coordinated services; and 3) improving the City's efforts to leverage more offender focused models to victim safety to reduce IPV related homicides and the percentage of IPV related crimes to total Part 1 crimes in Baltimore City. The committee will also focus on strategies to reduce domestic violence among high-risk populations, including African Americans and those within the LGBTQ+ community.

In addition to addressing the needs of victims, MONSE recognizes the need to invest in changing the behavior of perpetrators of domestic violence. The House of Ruth's Abuse Intervention Program aims to increase the safety of victims of intimate partner violence by holding batterers accountable and teaching non-violent, relationship skills. MONSE is committed to supporting and expanding similar trauma-informed programs focused on changing the behavior of domestic violence perpetrators and holding them accountable. MONSE also operates the Visitation Center, which provides safe and family-friendly supervised visitations and monitored exchanges to families impacted by domestic violence at no cost.

Lethality Assessment Program

In 2004, a model domestic violence policy for Maryland law enforcement was developed by the Baltimore Police Department, Maryland Chiefs of Police Association, Maryland State Police, and Maryland Sheriff's Association. It was updated in 2013 to include a Lethality Assessment Program (LAP) designed by renowned expert Dr. Jacqueline Campbell of Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing. BPD's Victim Advocates administer the Lethality Assessment and send the assessments to House of Ruth for follow-up. House of Ruth offers comprehensive services, including immediate access to services through a 24 Hour Hotline; Client Service Coordinators who work with victims providing safety planning, basic needs assistance, and resource referral; free legal services; individual and group counseling; therapeutic and enrichment services for children of victims; and Abuse Intervention through Gateway Project and Si Puedo programs to individuals who are emotionally, physically, or sexually abusing their partner.

While we recognize the dynamic nature of domestic violence risk, and that risk assessment tools are not the sole predictor of lethality, they can be effective in increasing self-protective actions by victims of IPV. The process of risk assessment with a survivor of IPV gives the service provider access to the gold standard of information about the violence in the relationship but also makes the survivors a partner in that assessment so that they assess for themselves the extent of their danger. In other words, the LAP's strength is not in providing a tool for law enforcement to make decisions for women, but in providing a tool to increase the information women have when making decisions for themselves.

MONSE coordinates a LAP workgroup, which will explore the role risk assessments currently play and should play as it relates to prosecutions, pre-trial release, probation conditions, repeat offenders, fatality case review, victim outreach, coordination of services, and agency protocols.

Sexual Assault

In 2011, Baltimore City established a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART). The SART coordinator position is housed within MONSE and is currently grant-funded through the Victims of Crime Act administered by the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth and Victim's Services. The SART team consists of members of law enforcement, advocates, hospital staff, and prosecutors. The team meets every other month to discuss trends, areas of concern and strengths. On alternating months, members meet and complete Case Reviews of all unfounded cases. As a result of the efforts of the BPD and the SART team, Baltimore's reporting of unfounded cases fell from a national high of 30% to 4% in 2019. As indicated in BPD's 2019 Sexual Assault Investigations Report, BPD had two sexual assault cases identified as unfounded as compared to 15 in 2018. This can be directly attributed to the SART's review process, which reviews each unfounded case to ensure the finding of unfounded is accurate.

Community Violence

MONSE is also committed to developing and improving strategies to reduce gun violence. Our flagship violence reduction program Safe Streets Baltimore aims to prevent gun violence in our communities. In partnership with BPD and the State's Attorney's Office, MONSE is preparing to launch the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRs). This strategy relies on strong collaboration between community members, support and outreach providers, and law enforcement, who engage directly with those most intimately involved in and affected by gun violence to keep them safe, alive, and free – supporting them in their daily lives, communicating community norms in support of everybody's safety and success, and where necessary, creating swift, certain, and legitimate sanctions for violence. When properly funded and implemented, this strategy has drastically reduced gun homicides and non-fatal shootings in cities across the country. These two programs are examples of efforts to reduce both targeted violence against women as well as incidents where female bystanders are injured by stray bullets. Safe Streets Baltimore and GVRs are just two examples of significant investments we are making in the city's gun violence prevention infrastructure. We are looking forward to working with the City Council, city agencies, and community partners to making Baltimore City a safer and healthier place for all women.

Respectfully submitted,



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cc: Sunny Schnitzer, Deputy Mayor, Public Safety
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