

## Montgomery

##  County Council

##### *From the Office of Council Vice President Tom Hucker*  *July 21, 2020*

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**Council unanimously approves funding**

**to expand Health and Human Services’**

**mobile crisis response capacity**

ROCKVILLE, Md., July 21, 2020—Today the Montgomery County Council unanimously approved a special appropriation of $592,202, spearheaded by Council Vice President Tom Hucker, to the fiscal year 2021 operating budget of the County’s Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to expand mobile crisis response services.

“A significant percentage of service calls are related to mental health or substance abuse. However, the County’s Mobile Crisis Team does not currently have the capacity to cover many of those calls leaving police officers, who are not mental health professionals, to respond,” said Council Vice President Hucker, who serves on the Council’s Public Safety Committee. “This special appropriation is a significant milestone in our work to increase the County’s capacity to have mental health professional appropriately respond to these calls. I believe having more mental health professionals on the ground can reduce tragic events such as the police-involved shootings of Emmanuel Okutuga, Robert White and Finan Berhe.”

“I worked to help launch Mental Health Court in our district and circuit courts, and I see this as a necessary step to decriminalize mental illness and move towards racial equity and social justice for all residents,” said Council President Sidney Katz. “We are one step closer to ensuring that all residents who experience mental health crises receive appropriate, therapeutic responses. The addition of six licensed mental health clinicians to the Department of Health and Human Services will go a long way in increasing the capacity of our already exceptional mobile crisis unit.”

“It is imperative that we increase the County’s capacity to respond to our mental health needs in an effective and appropriate manner,” said Councilmember Nancy Navarro, who serves as chair of the Council’s Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee. “That is why I requested that OLO review the data from our 911 and 311 calls to get a better picture of our needs. Know that when our residents tell us that they need to have trained professionals ready and able to assist, we are listening. This special appropriation is a step in the right direction; it is the first of what I hope will be many more actions taken to reshape our response to mental health needs in Montgomery County.”

“There is no question that mental health is critical to maintain one’s overall health,” said Councilmember Gabe Albornoz, chair of the Council’s Health and Human Services Committee. “The passage of this special appropriation is an important step forward to build upon our foundation and help bridge the gap within public health. By expanding the mobile crisis team, this will help residents in need to receive vital mental health services. This pioneering solution will help move our County forward, not backwards.”

“Individuals who are experiencing homelessness need access to more licensed social workers and fewer police officers,” said Councilmember Evan Glass, the Council’s Lead on Homelessness and Vulnerable Communities. “As we as a community begin a public conversation about how we rethink and restructure our police department, we must ensure that the solutions include greater investment in mental health and social workers. This is a good first step in that direction.”

DHHS operates the Crisis Center and staffs one Mobile Crisis Team, which is based in Rockville. The Mobile Crisis Team is a two-person team that responds to calls made directly to the Crisis Center and when the police request their assistance as a part of a police response. Currently, the County only has funding for one Mobile Crisis Team, and the team can only respond to one call at a time.

While work on scaling up this response model is underway, the need has been identified for additional licensed social workers in DHHS to lead additional Mobile Crisis Teams. This special appropriation would fund three social worker positions, so that the hiring process may begin to expand these response teams. The funding includes bilingual pay and it is critical that these positions include those who can serve residents for whom English is not their primary language.

Council Vice President Hucker described this appropriation as a necessary step to begin to create a more “robust system of care in which well-trained, trauma-informed, compassionate, unarmed professionals are the first point of contact for residents in psychological and emotional distress.”

As the County works toward a more effective crisis response and crisis care system during the Covid-19 public health crisis, focusing on expanding the resources and services available to residents who struggle with mental illness is a priority. Response from a crisis response team can help deescalate a situation and immediately begin a health-based response to safely deal with the underlying cause of the crisis.

The Council staff report for this special appropriation can be viewed [here](https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/council/Resources/Files/agenda/col/2020/20200721/20200721_2H.pdf).

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