

AN OPEN LETTER IN RESPONSE TO THE PRESIDENT’S EXECUTIVE ORDER ON SAFE POLICING FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES
SECTION 4. MENTAL HEALTH, HOMELESSNESS, AND ADDICTION

We are encouraged by the focus of the President’s June 16th Executive Order on shifting responsibility to address the needs of individuals with mental illnesses and substance use disorders, and those experiencing homelessness, away from law enforcement to appropriate social service providers. However, increasing the capacity of social workers and other mental health professionals to work alongside law enforcement to co-respond to address situations does not go far enough in reducing the role of law enforcement. We encourage the Administration, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and other federal agencies to provide leadership and funding to communities across the country working to develop crisis system capacity so that behavioral health system providers are available to address urgent and emergent behavioral health needs independently of law enforcement services and only engage law enforcement assistance when indicated by safety or criminal concerns. Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) programs; International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) One Mind Campaign; Police, Treatment and Community Collaborative (PTACC); Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD); and other models of law enforcement/behavioral health partnerships support collaborations that transform crisis response systems to minimize law enforcement involvement while ensuring that police and behavioral health providers are prepared to co-respond to situations only when necessary.

As we build capacity of the behavioral health system to take primary responsibility for responding to urgent and emergent behavioral health crises, we must ensure that communities of color benefit equally from the expansion of behavioral health system capacity and reduction in the role of law enforcement in behavioral health crises. While current attention is focused on law enforcement, the disparities and discrimination present in the health and behavioral health care systems are well documented. This must be addressed as we move forward in reimagining the role of law enforcement and support the capacity of behavioral health and social services to take on the role that is more appropriately theirs. Engaging and supporting the involvement of members of the most impacted communities will be critical to service planning and provision and holding systems accountable. We must all take an advocacy role to address inadequacies and stigma.

The need for change is immediate and it will be necessary to allocate funding and expand the capacity of behavioral health and social services independent of law enforcement funding. We encourage the Administration and all federal, state, county and municipal agencies to take a thoughtful, incremental and data-driven approach to expand the availability of evidence-based services. This will ensure individuals experiencing behavioral health crises receive optimal responses while minimizing law enforcement involvement whenever possible. We, the undersigned organizations, stand ready to assist.

