

The Detroit News

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Opinion: Respond to mental health emergencies with care, not police

Rick Outman and Stephanie Chang

Published 11:00 p.m. ET Oct. 4, 2021

Calling 911 during a loved one's heart attack summons trained medical professionals equipped to provide care and support.

Calling 911 during a loved one's mental health emergency, rather, can sometimes trigger the arrival of armed law enforcement officers, and has the potential to result in jail time, or in the worst case death or injury — not always the medical support or behavioral health intervention that is most appropriate.

Both are health emergencies, and both should be handled by people who are best trained to do so. This will also allow our sheriffs and police chiefs to better utilize officers' time, solving crimes and addressing public safety concerns for which they are uniquely trained.

In Michigan, roughly one in four people admitted to our jails lives with a mental illness. That number is even higher in rural communities. As leaders in our state, we have a responsibility to join communities across the country that have developed and are successfully implementing a safer, healthier and more empathetic way to respond to mental health emergencies — one that ensures all people living with mental illness receive the support they deserve.

Simultaneously, we need to address the fact that our criminal justice system grossly underutilizes diversion services that could both save state money and better address mental and behavioral health concerns in our communities.

We have proposed bipartisan solutions on the issues of policing, crisis response and jail diversion. This is not a matter of partisanship; it's simple common sense and empathy.

Our legislation will change the way that Michigan approaches policing and emergency response by creating opportunities to fund a crisis response model called "care response."

Care response involves sending unarmed mental health professionals to respond to emergency calls and ensuring they can connect someone experiencing an emergency with the necessary resources to support urgent needs at a moment's notice, such as medical care or shelter.

To address this issue from another angle, we are also introducing a bill that would keep people living with mental illness out of our jails by providing access to diversion services through the Behavioral Health Diversion Fund. The fund would offer grants to municipalities that want to expand or implement services to divert people living with mental illness from jails.

Together, these solutions will save lives and save Michigan taxpayers money, while allowing law enforcement to focus on the criminal and legal matters they are trained, equipped and ready to address.

As people continue calling for meaningful change within our criminal justice system, we are committed to moving forward with these common-sense bipartisan solutions — solutions that support those living with mental illness and our law enforcement and criminal justice professionals who have been serving as de-facto mental health providers.

We urge our colleagues in both the House and Senate to join us in supporting this legislation. These bills will save lives and change our communities. It's time to act.

Rick Outman, R-Six Lakes, represents the 33rd District in the Michigan Senate. Stephanie Chang, D-Detroit, represents the 1st District in the Michigan Senate.