

Good morning,

I am submitting testimony in favor of HB 2417 because I believe that focusing our resources on crisis interventions that reduce the likelihood that a person suffering from mental health problems ends up in the criminal justice system is the healthiest and most economical path forward for citizens of Jackson county. I'm a licensed clinical social worker and have worked in high-crisis environments for my entire career. In Butte county, I worked in a crisis-based program for youth 18 and younger with a team of 3, and responded to crisis calls that were behavioral in nature rather than criminal in nature. Providing families and young people with immediate support, tools to reduce future crisis episodes, and resources to address the long-term needs of the family was a much better option than parents being forced to call the police when they felt out of control. I can count on a single hand when any of those calls ever necessitated additional police enforcement, because we were consistently able to quickly assess and stabilize each situation due to our educational backgrounds and ongoing training. Mental health providers have years of training on understanding the complex needs of people suffering from addiction, and from mental health symptoms such as delusions and paranoia, and they are able to recognize and address the circumstances which may be contributing to a crisis. Police officers do not have educations in psychology, addiction, mental illness, or trauma. They are not adequately trained in crisis response or de-escalation strategies. They play an important role in responding to situations that are truly violent or criminal in nature, but people in crisis need help, not guns. They need to be understood and supported and kept safe, not surrounded by armed officers, confronted, cornered, or threatened with arrest. It's entirely inappropriate for police officers to be expected to meet the mental health needs of our community members. Continuing to expect them to meet this need results time and time again in the unjust incarceration and criminalization of people who need treatment rather than jail cells. The CAHOOTS model provides us with an example of a very successful alternative to this current mode of operation. Due the pandemic, more people are living in poverty and turning to substances to survive the harsh realities of homelessness. All across this country we've seen an increase in mental illness, regardless of socioeconomic status. This problem is visible all over Jackson County and it's not going away. Policing illness and poverty is financially untenable and morally unjust. Jackson County deserves the opportunity to adequately provide its citizens with the support and resources they need to make our community safer, healthier, more vibrant. This helps all of us.

Thank you so much for your time today.