

Community-Based Response Act

Senator Chris Van Hollen and Representative Karen Bass

Background:

Law enforcement officers are often sent to respond to emergency calls related to situations that do not actually require a law enforcement response. Some of these emergency calls relate to mental health or substance use disorder crises, check-ins for health and safety, a lack of housing or health care, and emergencies involving populations in need or who have historically faced discrimination. According to a [recent report](#) from The Justice Collaborative, in some jurisdictions, police spend more time on mental health-related calls than on burglaries or felony assaults. From 2008 to 2018, the number of 911 calls to report “emotionally disturbed persons” to the New York Police Department doubled, reaching nearly 180,000 unique calls in a year.

In many of these situations, communities would be better served by having an additional option for a community-based response that would dispatch professionals trained in mental and behavioral health or crisis response instead of law enforcement. This would help target the best professional intervention to the person in need and allow for the connection to immediate and ongoing services. Additionally, it could help avoid escalation of a crisis by involving law enforcement in a manner that can result in unnecessary arrests and incarceration and create increased risk of harm. In fact, [studies](#) of available data have shown that as many as half of the individuals killed by law enforcement have a disability; and people with an untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed during a police encounter. Existing social services-based emergency response models have demonstrated an ability to diffuse and resolve non-violent crisis situations and connect individuals with ongoing services and support, while also saving money.

The *Community-Based Response Act* would:

- Establish a new Community-Based Emergency and Non-Emergency Response Grant Program through the Department of Health and Human Services to establish programs to provide an additional option beyond law enforcement for community-based emergency response for covered populations in need of help or support in order to target the best professional intervention to an individual in need of help and avoid escalation of a crisis situation
 - Grant applicants must be comprised of local units of government and community-based organizations (and institutions of higher learning and behavioral health organizations, if applicable)
 - Covered populations include populations who have historically faced discrimination or would benefit from a social services-based response to emergencies.
- Provide \$100 million for each of fiscal years 2021 through 2025 for 5-year initiation grants and \$75 million for each of fiscal years 2026 and 2027 for 2-year continuation grants with a 25% non-federal match requirement.

Endorsements: The Justice Collaborative, National Urban League, National Action Network, Vera Institute of Justice, CASA, Center for American Progress, National Homelessness Law Center, National Association of Social Work, National Association of Black Social Workers, American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, PolicyLink, Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund, University of Maryland, Baltimore, Greater Baltimore Urban League, Baltimore Child Abuse Center, Citizens Policing Project, Beyond Youth Organizing