

Joanna Walker

Statement of CONCERNED FAIRFAX before the
AD HOC POLICE PRACTICES REVIEW COMMISSION

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. CONCERNED FAIRFAX is a group of citizens whose lives have in some way been touched by serious mental illness or substance abuse disorders. We are an advocacy committee of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Northern Virginia. We commend the Board of Supervisors for establishing the Commission to address important and complex issues.

We offer this statement from our standpoint as concerned citizens—both individuals living with a mental illness and family members—many of whom have come in contact with law enforcement and the judicial system.

The prevalence of mental illness in citizens who encounter the criminal justice system is well-known. According to Sheriff Kincaid's recent opinion piece in the Fairfax Times, more than a quarter of the inmates in the county jail have serious mental illness, often combined with a substance abuse disorder. Today, too many individuals who have a serious mental illness do not receive effective treatment or other supports. We look forward to assisting in the development of a comprehensive plan for our community.

We believe that any plan should include at least three elements.

First, we applaud the steps taken by the Fairfax County Police Department to expand Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) program for law enforcement officers. Often, our police officers are the first responders when individuals are experiencing mental health crises. The officers face the challenge of interacting with a person who, due their illness, may be exhibiting unusual or unpredictable behavior. CIT training provides officers with information and insight that can result in better outcomes for the officer, the individual, family members and hence, our community. We also support training, comparable to CIT training, including de-escalation techniques and mental health awareness, be provided to other stakeholders in the justice system, including emergency dispatchers, Adult Detention Center (ADC) employees and probation officers.

Second, we strongly support efforts to increase diversion to treatment where appropriate, rather than incarceration. In furtherance of this, we recommend expanded use of the sequential intercept model as a “how-to” method to move

away from the path of incarceration and toward a service-engagement model.

Third, we strongly support efforts to establish a Mental Health/Substance Abuse court docket. In order to support diversion, a court docket that specializes in handling cases that involve mental health and substance abuse is essential. Personnel within the court system, including judges, magistrates, prosecutors and public defenders would receive additional training in mental health and substance use disorders and diversion best practices.

We appreciate the work of commission members and
Thank you for
~~appreciate~~ the opportunity to express our views.