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American Psychological Association Recommendations
for U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Justice and
Counterterrorism
Hearing: Behavioral Health and Policing: Interactions and Solutions

The American Psychological Association is committed to the complex and difficult work of improving police interactions with members of the community impacted by mental and behavioral health concerns. For the last several decades, there have been repeated instances of violent conflicts between police and civilians with disabilities (psychiatric, physical, developmental, and cognitive), particularly as it pertains to police officers and individuals of color. Psychological science has found that racism intersects with other social and personal identities (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability status, socioeconomic status, etc.) in ways that compound experiences of oppression among diverse groups in the form of sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. (Deschamps & DeVos, 1998; Gee & Ford, 2011; Helms 2015; Liu et al., 2017). As an organization, it is our longstanding belief that positive change in addressing these historical traumas starts with our willingness to engage in open and honest dialogues on these difficult topics. These policing issues concerning implicit biases, ableism and racism are complex and multifaceted. Accordingly, they will require multifaceted and evidence-based approaches that embrace diversity, equity and inclusion and eradicate the negative stigma of mental illness. We thank the Committee for their willingness to engage in this important discussion and we appreciate the opportunity to submit the following recommendations for consideration.

- **Invest in Crisis Intervention Teams, Mental Health Response Teams, and de-escalation trainings.** Psychologists play a key role in community-based, crisis intervention teams (CITs) and mental health response teams (MHRTs) that promote de-escalation practices to achieve better outcomes. CITs train police officers to safely and effectively deal with situations involving individuals with serious mental illness. Tailored by each community to fit local needs, CITs unite the efforts of police officers, mental health professionals and community advocates to resolve potentially violent situations in positive ways. Whereas MHRTs typically send health care workers as a first response to non-violent calls involving individuals in mental health crisis. CITs, MHRTs and de-escalation trainings should include a strong focus on equity, diversity and inclusion as well as racial trauma to help mitigate the influence of prejudice and stereotypes and improve police/community relations. APA supports and encourages the committee to pass S.515 / H.R. 1368 - *Mental Health Justice Act of 2021*. This legislation will authorize the Secretary of Health and Human Services to award grants to States to hire, employ, train, and dispatch mental health professionals to be the initial responders in non-violent emergencies involving persons with a mental illness or an intellectual or developmental disability. APA also commends the tireless work of Senator Cornyn to bolster funding for police officer de-escalation trainings and are actively reviewing his forthcoming legislation.
- **Encourage private/public partnerships between mental health organizations and local law enforcement.** These partnerships can develop best practices for addressing community and police relations that can be disseminated widely across the nation to police departments and mental health facilities. Police-community partnerships encouraged by the Community Oriented Policing Office (COPS) of the Department of Justice can decrease stereotypes, increase citizen engagement and lead to better outcomes in law enforcement interactions with community members.
- **Bolster research and strengthen data collection.** APA calls for re-establishing a Science Advisory Board at the Department of Justice to help bridge the divide between research and practice in criminal justice fields. Through regular interactions with the Office of Justice Programs leadership and staff, members of the board



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would gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities of implementing and evaluating innovative approaches to the administration of criminal and juvenile justice especially as it pertains to policing interactions with members of the community with disabilities or in mental health crisis. APA research priorities also include robust funding for the National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics and COPS.

- **Increase the number of mental and behavioral health and industrial/organizational professionals in law enforcement agencies.** These professionals' expertise is crucial in helping law enforcement agencies hire the right people, train them appropriately, provide wellness services, and engage in a range of organizational transformations that increase transparency and accountability to the community. Moreover, these professionals do imperative work as it pertains to ongoing psychological monitoring of police officers' stress levels, mental health, burn-out, and attitudes toward the public including individuals with psychiatric, cognitive or physical disabilities.

APA stands ready to assist the Judiciary Committee in finding impactful bipartisan solutions to improve police interactions with individuals with mental and behavioral health issues and other disabilities. Please contact Ben Vonachen at bvonachen@apa.org if our association can be a resource.

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