



**Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division (B-HEARD) and Responses to Mental Health Crises Oversight Hearing Testimony Before the NYC Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction Jointly with the Committee on Public Safety, Committee on Hospitals, and the Committee on Fire and Emergency Management**

**September 23, 2024**

Thank you, Chairs Lee, Salaam, Narcisse, and Ariola, and to the other members of these committees for convening this critical oversight hearing.

My name is Joelle Ballam-Schwan and I am with the Supportive Housing Network of New York. The Network is a membership and advocacy organization representing over 200 nonprofits that collectively run over 62,000 units of supportive housing statewide. I am also a steering committee member of Correct Crisis Intervention Today (CCIT-NYC), a coalition working to transform how New York City responds to mental health crises.

Mental health crisis response is of critical importance to both me and to my organization. On a personal level, I have lost very close loved ones to -- and have supported others during -- mental health crises. At an organizational level, our community has an increasing need for a peer-led, non-police mental health crisis response system.

Supportive housing is permanent, affordable housing with on-site voluntary services for those who have experienced homelessness and face systemic barriers to accessing and maintaining permanent housing. It serves people living with serious mental health diagnoses, substance use disorder, HIV/AIDS, and families and young adults who are homeless or at-risk of becoming so. Black people and people of color are disproportionately affected by housing insecurity because of systemic and institutional racism.

Nationwide, the pandemic exacerbated mental health crises for people of all ages and across the socioeconomic spectrum. As a result, for the past few years, the majority of our members have reported an alarming increase in the incidence and intensity of mental health concerns amongst their new and existing tenants.

Staff and tenants are in real need of a resource to call upon to ensure that an individual in crisis can be met with a person-centered approach, rooted in genuine connection and communal wellbeing, not martial enforcement. B-HEARD, as it currently operates, is not that.

B-HEARD response teams fail to include peers (people with lived mental health experience). We know that, across the country, mental health crisis response systems led by trained peers have proven more successful than police-led responses. [For example, the Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets \(CAHOOTS\) program in Eugene, Oregon has found that fewer than 2% of the calls they responded to required police back-up.](#)



In addition, B-HEARD teams are currently responding to only 29% of mental health-related 911 calls in the precincts in which it operates, leaving police to respond over 70% of the time in those 31 precincts. We have seen time and time again that police are not equipped to handle mental health crises. Since 2015, at least 20 people have had fatal encounters with the NYPD when experiencing an emotional or mental health crisis, and 85% were people of color. In order to operate outside of the police dispatch system, B-HEARD should be dispatched to the newly expanded 988 mental health crisis hot-line as opposed to 911.

B-HEARD must also be made available 24/7 rather than the 16 hours per day it currently operates.

And of course, the program must be expanded to operate citywide.

B-HEARD is a very important step in the right direction, but significant changes must be implemented as soon as possible: We must ensure peers are on response teams, route the dispatch system through 988, and fund the program to operate at all hours and across the city.

With the [recent killing of 19-year old Win Rosario](#), we must say enough is enough, and fully invest in and build out a true peer-led mental health crisis response program in New York City. Failing to do so is costing lives.

Thank you for your time.