



November 28th, 2023

Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 610

Relating to: a law enforcement officer virtual behavioral health crisis care pilot program

Dear Committee Members:

Communities across Wisconsin are transforming the way they respond to mental health 911 calls. Instead of the traditional “cuff and stuff” method where officers immediately handcuff those in distress and place them in the back of a squad car, more emphasis is being placed on defusing non-violent behavioral health emergencies without the need for physical restraint. Police officers are getting trained on these new techniques and some municipalities are even utilizing mental health professionals who are specially trained to deal with more complex disorders.

As an active police officer, I can attest to the benefit of these alternative approaches. In my experience, the last thing people in distress want while going through an episode is to be constrained by the police – it creates more anxiety, increases outbursts, and leads to worse outcomes. Allowing officers to connect with professionals during these critical times and work with those in crisis often times deescalates the situation and prevents law enforcement from needing to transport these individuals to another location.

Data backs up this observation too. According to a 2023 study conducted by the University of Iowa, having virtual crisis care during law-enforcement-involved manic episodes resulted in patients remaining in place nearly 8 out of 10 times. By reducing the amount of involuntary commitments or the need to relocate those experiencing a manic episode, police departments are able to save precious time, resources, and taxpayer dollars. Other stakeholders have taken note of this – 43 counties in South Dakota and 13 counties in Nevada have recently implemented similar programs.

Senate Bill 610 creates a pilot program to help connect law enforcement with mental health professionals when responding to mental health 911 calls. The goal would be for the officers to utilize the mental health professionals to mitigate and diffuse potential situations. As amended, the Department of Health Services (DHS) would award grants to certified county crisis agencies who can then contract with their local law enforcement jurisdictions to develop and provide equipment for virtual behavioral health care. DHS is required to follow specific criteria to ensure the program would be accessible to both rural and urban parts of the state. The bill also includes measures so that no agency receives more than 10% of the total allotted program funding, and participating county crisis agencies are required to pay for 25% of the cost of the equipment and services. This initiative was funded in the 2023-25 state budget, so there is no fiscal impact.

Mental health calls are only increasing. A pilot program such as this incentivizes new approaches that are proven to have better outcomes for police, patients, and pocketbooks. Thank you all again for allowing me to testify on this legislation. I am available to take any questions.

Respectfully,

Senator Jesse James
23rd Senate District



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Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 610

Thank you members of the Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families for hearing public testimony on Senate Bill 610 or the Mental Health Police Assistance and Crisis Telehealth Act – MHPACT for short.

Our police interact with thousands of people each and every year. These requests for service range from noise complaints, neighborhood disputes, homicides and everything in between. Although our law enforcement officers are extremely well trained I think it is safe to say the overwhelming majority are not mental health professionals.

There is no denying that the crisis of mental health has grown exponentially in recent years. Wisconsin, like many other states, is struggling to find the right answers to address the many intricacies of this issue. We see a continued need for mental health services not only in our urban centers, but we see mental health deserts in many of our rural communities.

Law enforcement are often the first to respond to individuals who may be going through any number of mental health issues. Depending on the situation, law enforcement may be forced to detain or even arrest individuals for their own safety or the public's. These individuals may be suffering from any number of issues and perhaps detention is not the best course of action. The goal of this legislation is to utilize our law enforcement in conjunction with 24/7 virtual telehealth services and minimize the amount of involuntary commitments of individuals. Therefore, providing immediate professional service to those in need and making our law enforcement professionals more efficient.

MHPACT utilizes funds already authorized by the enacted 2023-2025 biennial budget. Under the bill, we are creating a pilot program that would study the effectiveness of equipping law enforcement with another tool to diffuse mental health crises. The Department of Health Services would be required to seek a contractor to supply tablets and training to participating law enforcement departments. Officers would utilize mental health professionals through the medium of a tablet to provide direct and immediate help to those suffering with a mental health crisis. Due to this being a pilot program, certain criteria has been established to ensure a diverse sampling of effectiveness from across Wisconsin – especially ensuring equal access to both rural and urban communities.

Ultimately, MHPACT is the next step in a broader push to expand mental health services across our state. It is the first line of defense for law enforcement in often precarious and difficult scenarios. We want to prioritize law enforcement's time and resources while providing real time care to those who need it. The research on virtual crisis care efforts like this around the country indicate a great degree of success. You can't argue with success.

I want to thank the bipartisan group of legislators who also recognized this as a worthy issue and decided to co-sponsor this legislation. Wisconsin has a unique opportunity to build out our mental health infrastructure while serving our citizens and communities more effectively. Committee members, please join me in supporting Senate Bill 610. I would be happy to respond to any questions or concerns about the legislation.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert G. Donovan". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Bob Donovan
State Representative – 84th Assembly District