

AN ACT TO CREATE ALTERNATIVES FOR COMMUNITY EMERGENCY SERVICES

H.2519/S.1552

Sponsored by Rep. Sabadosa and Sen. Chang-Diaz

Establish a grant program to provide an additional option beyond law enforcement, such as social workers, peer support specialists, and other community members, for community-based emergency responses.

Current problem

- Law enforcement officers have become the default first responders when someone is in crisis, which disproportionately affects communities of color.
- Emergency calls may 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.
- These types of situations do not actually require a law enforcement response and sending armed law enforcement officers to respond may cause undue harm to those in need of help.
- Existing social services-based emergency response models show that non-violent crisis situations can be resolved without law enforcement, connecting individuals to ongoing services and support, while also saving money.

Because the fundamental function and training of law enforcement is to address violations of the law, their response to social, behavioral, and mental health emergencies often ends in arrest and criminal charges. Community members and allied professionals, such as social workers, community health workers, and peer support specialists, are best positioned to respond to mental and behavioral health emergencies, including crises related to substance use, lack of housing, or inadequate health care, and can provide referrals for community-based services, ensuring people in crisis get access to the resources they need.

This legislation is inspired by federal legislation filed by Sen. Chris Van Hollen and Rep. Karen Bass, and would create a new Alternatives for Community Emergency Services Grant Program, similar to **CAHOOTS** in Oregon through the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. This would increase the availability of non-law-enforcement, unarmed community-based emergency response options for calls to 911 in order to help individuals in need, avoid escalation of a crisis situation, and save lives.

Funding would go to municipalities and community-based organizations (CBOs), not law enforcement. These community members and allied professionals would be employees of municipalities or CBOs, not police departments.