

**Deputy Inspector General Crystal Okorafor**

*Senate Bill 2287 Testimony*

Texas State Senate Criminal Justice Committee Public Hearing

April 25, 2023

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Chairman Whitmire and members of the Senate Committee on Criminal Justice, thank you for allowing me to be here today to address the importance of Senate Bill 2287.

In my role as the Deputy Inspector General for the City of Houston, I overseeing the Office of Policing Reform & Accountability ("OPRA"), by improving police policies, and build mutual trust with our diverse communities, especially in the wake of the murder of Geroge Floyd.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health cases have increased significantly in Houston and other Texas cities.

As one of my offices' primary functions to oversees independent investigations of various allegations, we have to be reminded that law enforcement officers are not mental health professionals.

In response to this concern, along with others, Mayor Sylvester Turner's Taskforce on Policing Reform was formed.

This 45-member citizen group, released a 153-page report in September 2020, which made recommendations for bringing together community, police, unions, and local legislators to protect and serve citizens' constitutional rights. This Taskforce looked to best practices across the nation, to make recommendations in six categories of:

(1) Community Policing; (2) Independent Oversight; (3) Power Dynamics; (4) Crisis Intervention; (5) Field Readiness; and (6) Clear Expectations.

A key recommendation of the taskforce was to strengthen existing partnerships between law enforcement, mental health professionals, and social services organizations in order to reduce officers' workloads when responding to mentally ill populations or those of a mental disability.

The Houston Police Department has taken great steps to enhance its working relationship with crisis intervention partners by embracing a continuous and evolving approach. The Task Force recommendations stressed the need to focus on programs for crisis intervention, which support officers in navigating crisis calls that may involve mental health needs.

Through the expansion of the City's and HPD's existing partnerships, our police officers are able to focus on their roles as guardians, while our civilians will receive more support from trained social workers.

An analysis of the Task Force's data indicates that 9,061 (or 36.4%) of the then 25,227 (2014) division calls resulted in emergency room visits to hospitals.

Over 80% of the Mayor's Task Force on Policing recommendations have been completed, with all but one pending item being addressed through crisis intervention.

We have expanded CCD programs by extending coverage by mental health counselors to 24/7; increase the number of mobile crisis outreach teams by 18 teams and increased staffing for Crisis Intervention Response Teams ("CIRTs"), which include both police officers and licensed professional clinicians ("LPCs"), who respond to mental health issues collaboratively.

This is a major success for the City of Houston in terms of proactive initiatives.

However, these accomplishments would have not been made possible without assistance.

As a result of funding from the American Rescue Plan Act ("ARPA"), Mayor Sylvester Turner launched One Safe Houston in February 2022, concentrating on four (4) key areas: Violence Reduction and Crime Prevention, Crisis Intervention, Response and Recovery, Youth Outreach Opportunities, and Community Partnerships. As part of his public safety initiative, 22 million dollars have been allocated to support and strengthen our law enforcement and mental health professionals.

To ensure that law enforcement continues to receive additional assistance, SB 2287 is essential.

These additional resources enable individuals other than law enforcement to provide detention and obtain emergency detention orders for individuals experiencing mental health crises, thereby reducing police involvement. These efforts to ease the burden on law enforcement will allow them to use their limited resources to combat violent crime more effectively and efficiently.

For most mental illness crises, law enforcement should not be the first responders, since they lack the same knowledge, training, and expertise as mental health professionals.

On average, our HPD officers handle 900 to 1,000 emergency detention orders each month. In,

- 2020 it was 11,506;
- 2021 it was 11,197;
- and 2022 resulting in 11,013

We have seen a 4% decrease in police response in those three years, directly related to the resources we put in place to relieve our officers' workload.

We cannot stress enough that they can't handle these matters on their own.

It is crucial to continue to offer them support, as well as a community-based approach, so they can focus on their core responsibilities.

Furthermore, SB 2287 is respectfully supported by the City for these reasons mentioned today.

The City and I would like to thank you Chairman Whitmire and the remainder of the committee for your favorable consideration and opportunity to provide our support regarding this proposed legislation.

Thank you.