

I am writing to provide comments on Draft Bill No. 3471: An Act Concerning Police Accountability, in particular Section 16 as it pertains to mental health.

This proposal seeks to create mandatory mental health assessments of police in connection to accountability and the response to racism. While connection to mental health services is commendable, it does not create a solution to racism within the system of policing. It also serves to perpetuate the idea of identifying “bad apples” when racist practices are exposed while simultaneously utilizing mental health services in a way that can be further stigmatizing and punitive.

Racism is not a mental health condition and there is no psychiatric or psychological tool that can be used to uncover or reverse racist ideology or actions. Conflating mental illness with racism is inaccurate and dangerous as it stigmatizes those with mental illness and fails to hold individuals accountable for racist behaviors.

Finally, creating mandatory mental health screenings and assessments to identify “bad apples” as it were does nothing to address the systemic nature of racism within policing. If we wish to confront systemic racism, we must shift policing to acknowledge and confront racism. Communities must be involved in the process, allowing them to have a voice and giving them an opportunity to heal. Community involvement in the hiring, training, collaborating and evaluating police practice is essential.

Overall, the need to address racism and hold police accountability requires a fundamental frame shift. Racism needs to be acknowledged and confronted. It cannot be tolerated or hidden from the communities that are involved. Mental health services should be utilized to support communities, including police. This requires services to be accessible, confidential and utilized for mental health support rather than mandated and connected to an ability to maintain employment. Identifying racism as mental illness will not serve to fight against systemic racism and will actually be a step backwards in terms of working towards humanity, justice and equality.

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