

I comment primarily on Sec. 16, but also on the entire bill as whole

Nothing in law, policy, or department requirements should discourage police from seeking mental wellness services. This proposal risks increasing the stigma of psychological struggle, need for services, and mental illness by identifying psychological difficulty as something to be screened for and guarded against. Further, the proposed bill co-opts mental health providers into the role of monitors who control employment and status. Providers should remain as available supports and resources.

Unfortunately, the bill does nothing to recognize, acknowledge, or thwart systemic, institutional, cultural, and implicit racism. Racism is not a mental illness; there are no psychiatric or psychological assessments that uncover racism. This bill implicitly equates racism with mental illness by association.

A much more effective bill would change policy to make psychiatric services more available, acceptable, and private. If Connecticut wishes to restructure policing, it first must admit to and confront racism. Only then will constructive reforms emerge. Each community, particularly persons of color and particularly the community leaders of color – pastors, caregivers, teachers, parents, business owners, those who run shelters, nursing homes, daycares – and also those marginalized by racism, who have suffered injustice - need to be involved in the leadership and oversight of police departments at the level of recruitment, screening, hiring, training, supporting, collaborating, and monitoring. Through that association and organization, with time, there is a chance to change the culture of policing. There is also a chance that such changes will attract to the police force more people who embody empathy, belongingness, and a longing to serve justice and assure equality.

Labeling as mentally ill, police who fail to serve their community, fail in compassion and justice, stigmatizes those with mental illness in an unconscionable way and expunges those who are racist from taking responsibility for self-reflection and self-correction. The policy reflects on our government and its refusal to recognize racism and struggle to understand and uproot it.

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