



Arlington Mental Health & Disability Alliance

“Advocating for self-determination and dignity”

March 29, 2022

Hon. Katie Cristol, Arlington County Board Chair
& Members of the Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22201

Hon. Beth Arthur, Arlington County Sheriff
1425 North Courthouse Road
Arlington, Virginia 22201

Dear Ms. Cristol, Members of the Board and Sheriff Arthur,

We write on behalf of the Arlington Mental Health and Disability Alliance. Our members are children and adults with mental illnesses and other disabilities, their families, and allies. We advocate for improved services and opportunities with a goal of maximum self-determination and dignity.

Arlington County is not living up to its principles when it comes to preventing predictable and unnecessary deaths at our local jail. The Alliance considers substance use disorders to be disabling conditions that must be addressed through health care. Further, those who are locked up in Virginia jails are under a legal disability since they are not free to pursue health services on their own.

Publicly available information about the seven custodial deaths since 2015 suggests an incredibly significant connection between alcohol or substance use withdrawal or intoxication. We do not know enough about the circumstances of every death, but **we do know that existing police and sheriff’s office protocols have proven inadequate to prevent these deaths**. We also know that changing the medical provider has not prevented custodial deaths.

We strongly recommend that you pursue in this budget cycle, the hiring of an addiction medicine doctor to review existing protocols in both agencies and make recommendations for changes so that there will be no further substance-use related deaths in the jail.

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Letter re funding review of substance use protocol review

We are pleased to share that the American Society of Addiction Medicine (“ASAM”) has already brought together a group of such experts. ASAM was recently awarded a grant to develop clinical guidelines for withdrawal management in America’s jails by the Bureau of Justice Assistance of the United States Department of Justice in partnership with the National Institute of Corrections.ⁱ

Maureen Boyle, PhD, Chief Quality and Science Officer Departmental Oversight of ASAM has offered to facilitate outreach for such a purpose and has provided us with the names of the participating experts for the grant program.ⁱⁱ We understand that any one of the addiction medicine physicians listed below would be qualified to undertake such a review.

We strongly encourage the County Board, the County Manager, and the Chief of Police to pursue this effort in coordination with the Sheriff’s Office. Do not delay. This may be the single most crucial step to preventing custodial deaths at the Arlington jail.

Sincerely yours,

Juliet Hiznay
Steering Committee
AMH&DA
jdhpllc@gmail.com

Naomi Verdugo
Steering Committee
AMH&DA
verdugo.naomi@gmail.com

ⁱ <https://www.cossapresources.org/Program/Applying/Opportunity/bad1098c-8af4-4ecb-ad81-461cb6de6710> See also <https://bja.ojp.gov/doc/managing-substance-withdrawal-in-jails.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Committee Members: Kevin Fiscella, MD; Jeff Alvarez, MD; Andrew Angelino, MD; Miriam Komaromy, MD; Sandra Springer, MD; Shannon Robinson, MD; Marc Stern, MD; Donna Strugar Fritsch, MPA; Geoff Stobart; Jeff Clark; Oscar Aviles; Carrie Hill, JD