

Sheppard Mullin Co-Counsels With the ACLU to Challenge Washington, D.C.'s Response to Mental Health Emergencies

Complaint Charges the District of Columbia with Discriminating Against People with Mental Health Disabilities in Violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act

07.06.2023

Sheppard Mullin, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the ACLU of D.C. today filed a lawsuit in a Washington, D.C. federal court on behalf of community organization Bread for the City, challenging the District of Columbia's (the "District") practice of sending police, rather than mental health providers, to respond to mental health crises. The complaint alleges that the District's response to mental health emergencies violates the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act.

"Experts agree that someone experiencing a mental health crisis must be able to call a mental health provider who can help," said Dan Brown, Sheppard Mullin's pro bono partner. "It's now time for our communities to do the right thing for residents experiencing mental health crises, and we are proud to partner with the ACLU to advance this important cause."

National and local experts have concluded that the reliance on police to address mental health crises is more likely to exacerbate than alleviate the mental health issue for which help is sought and recommend that communities invest in mental health providers to handle such emergencies. Yet, in Washington, D.C., less than 1 percent of 911 calls classified as mental health emergencies get a response from mental health clinicians and certified peer support specialists. In contrast, 90 percent of 911 calls related to physical health emergencies get a response from an EMT or paramedic.

"Someone who calls 911 for a physical health emergency gets trained medical providers who can treat and stabilize them. But someone who calls 911 for a mental health emergency gets a police officer with handcuffs and a gun," said Susan Mizner, director of the ACLU's Disability Rights Program. "More than just illogical and dangerous, D.C.'s emergency response system fails to provide the same level of care for people in mental health crises as for people in physical health crises. This is precisely the type of unequal treatment our disability rights laws are designed to protect against."

The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia by Sheppard Mullin, the ACLU Disability Rights Program, ACLU Criminal Law Reform Project, and the ACLU of the District of Columbia on behalf of Bread for the City.

Read a copy of the Complaint in *Bread for the City v. District of Columbia* [here](#).

In addition to Brown, Sheppard Mullin partner Steve Hollman and associates Calla Simeone and Nikole Snyder are assisting on the case.

Attorneys

Daniel L. Brown

Steven P. Hollman

Calla Simeone

Nikole Snyder

Practice Areas

Litigation