



COUNTY OF ERIE

MARK C. POLONCARZ

COUNTY EXECUTIVE

EC LEG OCT 18 '21 PM 2:51

October 18, 2021

Erie County Legislature
92 Franklin Street – Fourth Floor
Buffalo, New York 14202

Re: Non-Law Enforcement Response to Mental Health Calls

Dear Honorable Members:

Enclosed please find a memorandum from the Commissioners of Central Police Services and Mental Health concerning non-law enforcement response to mental health calls. The Commissioners provided an update regarding the issues and challenges in responding to mental health calls, along with Erie County's proactive measures to help address them.

This memorandum outlines the actions taken thus far and the recommendations for future steps to help address the mental health crisis. The partnership between Central Police Services and the Department of Mental Health has produced a 911 mental health diversion pilot program and the use of behavioral health teams. Our efforts in Erie County are utilizing best practices in providing mental health resources to assist law enforcement and have put us on the cutting edge of service delivery.

If your Honorable Body requires any further information, please contact Commissioners James Jancewicz at the Department of Central Police Services and Mark O'Brien at the Department of Mental Health. Thank you for your consideration on this matter.

Sincerely yours,

Mark C. Poloncarz, Esq.
Erie County Executive

MCP/jz
Enclosure

cc: Commissioner of Central Police Services, James Jancewicz
cc: Commissioner of Mental Health, Mark O'Brien



MEMORANDUM COUNTY OF ERIE CENTRAL POLICE SERVICES

TO: Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive
Jennifer Hibit, Chief of Staff

FROM: James Jancewicz, Commissioner of Central Police Services
Mark O'Brien, Commissioner of Mental Health

DATE: October 8, 2021

RE: Non-Law Enforcement Response to Mental Health Calls

Across the nation and in Erie County law enforcement and mental health professionals are exploring potential innovative non-law enforcement responses to address calls involving people experiencing a mental health crisis. On September 23, 2021, Central Police Services (CPS) Commissioner James Jancewicz and Department of Mental Health Commissioner Mark O'Brien participated in a seminar conducted by the National Association of Counties pertaining to this topic. The seminar included presenters from New York City, Washington D.C., Ulster County, NY and the Cahoots Program in Eugene, OR. All of these municipalities have similar models and are in various stages of development from pilot programs to being well established in Oregon. The seminar demonstrated that counties and cities regardless of size share many of the same issues and challenges in responding to mental health calls.

The focus of the seminar primarily involved behavioral health teams with law enforcement and the development of 911 mental health diversion programs. The overarching goal is to provide the most appropriate response to mental health calls while balancing the need for overall public safety. In addition, the goal is to reduce the calls for service related to super utilizers of the mental health and criminal justice systems. The seminar highlighted the importance of training front line staff, funding sources, establishing inter-disciplinary partnerships and data collection to track outcomes. The seminar demonstrated Erie County is following the best practices in providing mental health resources to assist law enforcement.

Behavioral health teams in Erie County are in place with the Buffalo, Cheektowaga, West Seneca, Town of Tonawanda and the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority Police Departments. These programs are operated and funded through the police departments which contract with mental health agencies to respond to designated mental health related calls for service. The remaining agencies rely upon the Mobile Response Team operated by Crisis Services.

Erie County has trained approximately 700 police officers in Crisis Intervention Training (CIT). Most recently, CIT was offered during the week of September 27, 2021 in Erie County. CIT is being conducted for police officers at the Erie County Law Enforcement Training Academy. Some larger departments have dedicated command officers to oversee the department's response to mental health calls. In particular, the Buffalo Police Department (BPD) has a dedicated mental health unit led by a captain. Since 2017, in addition to the 700 CIT trained officers, every recruit police officer graduating from the Erie County Law Enforcement Training Academy has received 40 hours of mental health/disability awareness training. This far exceeds the number of hours mandated by the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services. This does not include separate and extensive hours of academy instruction in de-escalation techniques and decision-making. In addition, since 2017, CPS has conducted ten training sessions related to mental health and disability awareness for call takers and dispatchers. The next sessions are scheduled on October 21 and 28, 2021.

During June 2021, New York City and Washington, D.C., initiated pilot 911 mental health diversion programs which are ongoing. Similar pilot programs are ongoing in Baltimore, MD and Los Angeles, CA. Last year, CPS and Crisis Services initiated discussions to formulate a 911 mental health diversion program to assist callers in need of mental health services. Through limited funding provided by the Patrick E. Lee Foundation Crisis Services was able to formally partner with CPS to initiate a pilot program. The 911 mental health diversion pilot program in Erie County was initiated on January 26, 2021 and concluded on April 15, 2021.

The Erie County program was modeled after existing programs in Houston, TX and Broome County, NY, as well as utilizing the expertise of the Erie County Department of Mental Health, BPD and Crisis Services. The pilot program developed defined criteria which would warrant a 911 call being transferred to Crisis Services instead of triggering a BPD response. The CPS technical team adjusted the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system to allow officers and dispatchers to be aware of a diverted 911 call. The CAD allows 911 calls to be dispatched and monitored as well as being an electronic record keeping system.

Subsequent to establishing the diversion criteria the staff from CPS and Crisis Services were trained on the diversion program, CAD and other related tasks. The pilot program was reviewed by Hilbert College Institute of Law and Justice. Currently, plans and funding are in place to establish a permanent 911 mental health diversion program with limited hours in Erie County during January 2022. One key outcome of the pilot program was the development of partnerships among Crisis Services, Erie County Department of Mental Health and CPS. The permanent program will utilize the lessons learned and strategies from the pilot project and continue to incorporate recommendations from mental health professionals.

Moving forward the county should continue to promote the establishment of behavioral health teams with law enforcement, initiate a permanent 911 mental health diversion program operated on a 24/7 basis, continue training of frontline personnel, develop interdisciplinary partnerships and continually review existing programs and national best practices. It is important to note that behavioral health teams and 911 diversion programs are only two components of a much larger

overall community response to address the mental health crisis in the United States. CPS and the Department of Mental Health will continue to work closely with law enforcement agencies and other partners to continue to address this important issue.

This memorandum is respectfully submitted for your review. Please contact me with any questions or concerns.