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Detroit Wayne, police team up to fix 'broken' mental health response

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- Intervention training underway with Detroit police officers and 911 call center dispatchers
- Co-response teams pair officers, mental health professionals for emergency calls
- Goals include connecting people in need with services to reduce incarceration, homelessness



Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network

Commander Melissa Gardner consults with Detroit Wayne's Andrea Smith about working on a crisis plan for mental health calls.

A growing number of Detroit police officers and 911 call center dispatchers are training to respond more effectively to emergency situations where people are in some type of mental health or substance use crisis.

It is part of an innovative program that has gained traction since last summer's tumultuous Black Lives Matter protests and ongoing calls for improved community policing, coupled with more funding for behavioral health training.



Last December, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, Detroit Police Chief James Craig and Eric Doeh, now interim CEO with Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network, announced a partnership to fix a "broken system" by adding behavioral health support to police, 911 dispatchers and homeless outreach workers.

Since then, more than 60 Detroit officers have undergone comprehensive crisis intervention team training, a 40-hour course that teaches a community-based approach to helping people who are experiencing a mental health crisis, Doeh said.

DWIHN also has trained more than 90 911 call center dispatchers in a 16-hour crisis intervention team program.

"We've had over 300 co-response runs with police officers and behavioral health specialists who have dealt with the person or persons who were experiencing those challenges," Doeh said. "Detroit police used to make these runs on their own. Now they have some help."

Detroit Police Captain Tonya Leonard-Gilbert said the partnership has been a success and has been expanded from downtown to the 9th Precinct near the Grosse Pointes and soon out to northwest Detroit.



"It's been good because DPD takes pride in serving the community and we're really trying to work hard to bridge the gap and help our most vulnerable populations," Leonard-Gilbert said. "As of today, we've had very good

feedback, very, very positive reception from the community so far, as well as with the members who are (Crisis Intervention Team) trained."

Doeh said DWIHN has always offered crisis intervention team training with DPD and other police agencies through existing grants. Each year, some 300 DPD officers go through mental health first aid and QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) suicide prevention training, he said.

Over the next year, at least 20 percent of DPD's responding officers will be certified in crisis intervention team skills.

"These efforts should reduce overall incarceration and hospitalization costs and provide better treatment options to the people we serve," Doeh said. "Jail diversion and homeless outreach lead to connections to treatment. This pilot is more than just training, it is a culture and community shift that bridges the gap between the law enforcement and behavioral health sectors."

Costs for the mental health diversion pilot program for the first year will total \$2.46 million. Funding comes from DWIHN's existing grants and the city of Detroit. For example, the crisis intervention program will cost \$1.2 million, 911 response \$742,000 and the homeless outreach \$315,000.

"When we decided to form this partnership, we knew additional dollars will be needed to expand the program" in year two, said Doeh, adding that grants and private donations will be sought.

Besides crisis intervention training and the co-response teams, DWIHN and DPD also are working with Detroit's Housing and Revitalization Department. The goal is to connect homeless people with mental health services and offering temporary or permanent housing.

Leonard-Gilbert said the partnership is getting ready to launch the homeless outreach program. She said a proposal is before the City Council for approval. Meanwhile, Leonard-Gilbert gave an example of how a co-response team worked to find a homeless young lady shelter and health care services.

"A few weeks ago in the 9th Precinct, when it was very cold, 911 got a call about a young lady who was sleeping in a storage locker with no heat," she said. "(An officer) with a behavioral health specialist responded and were able to get her transported by EMS to the hospital for services and back to home." DWIHN is the largest of 10 regional behavioral health networks in Michigan. It provides mental health and substance use services to 75,000 children and adults it serves in Wayne County.

"We had a very challenging summer to say the least because of COVID and racial disparity that came to light," Doeh said. "Behavioral health is a big part of it. Contact with law enforcement didn't always result in meaningful and peaceful end. The board wanted to do something more."

Nationwide, protesters objected to the deaths of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor in Louisville and others who died at the hands of police. Some protesters were also asking to "defund the police," a catch phrase intended as a call for policymakers to divert more money into mental health.

Doeh addressed the issue in an [op-ed piece](#) in the Detroit Free Press.

"Police agencies throughout the nation are trained in de-escalation techniques, crisis intervention and mental health first aid. If defunding the police involves allocating appropriate funding for mental health services, you have my support," Doeh wrote.

More than 80 percent of people charged with misdemeanor offenses who are housed in the Wayne County Jail have mental health challenges, according to DWIHN data. At least 30 percent of homeless people have behavioral health issues.

"Investing in programming that prioritizes mental-health treatment and early prevention would help lessen the strain on police services and give treatment to persons in need," Doeh wrote.

In a statement, DPD's Craig said officers regularly interact with people who have mental illness.

"We can only succeed in addressing this issue by working with organizations and leaders across our community," Craig said. "This is not a problem we can arrest our way out of, nor is jail the proper treatment facility for people suffering with mental illness."

Leonard-Gilbert said DPD has several goals for the partnership. One is to reduce the use of emergency services for individuals who are experiencing a mental health crisis by providing them linkages to services and resources. Another is to reduce 911 calls for "high utilizers that are in need of mental health services, and also provide them with resources and obviously services to minimize their need for emergency response," she said.

A third goal is to addressing the mental health and housing needs of the homeless and use the co-response team and follow-up interactions to find them health care and housing.

"We want to be able to help resolve those issues of our most endangered population and give them a long-term housing or short term housing, get them medication or whatever services they need to be successful in our community," Leonard-Gilbert said.