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Expanding Alternative Crisis Response in Los Angeles County

When someone is experiencing a mental health crisis, they need to be able to connect with a trained mental health professional immediately. For too long, dialing 9-1-1 has been the only option for many people in crisis, but neither law enforcement nor paramedics are adequately trained to handle such behavioral health crises. In fact, many people are afraid to call 9-1-1 when their loved ones are experiencing a mental health crisis because too often encounters with law enforcement escalate the situation and result in incarceration, injury, or even death.

Over the last few years, Los Angeles County (County) and other entities have implemented a variety of programs to provide alternative crisis response options to the public. For example, the Department of Mental Health (DMH) operates Psychiatric Mobile Response Teams (PMRT) and Therapeutic Transport vans, which provide a non-law enforcement response to someone experiencing a mental health crisis. These teams can be accessed through the DMH Help Line and can be deployed to someone in crisis who is not an immediate danger to others or in need of immediate medical attention.

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Beginning in Summer 2022, these teams will be accessible through 9-8-8 when it goes live as the national number for suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotlines.

In order for PMRT and 9-8-8 to be an effective method of alternative crisis response, they must operate at a comparable capacity to law enforcement and 9-1-1. Unfortunately, PMRT is currently limited in size and scope. The teams do not operate between the hours of 2:00 am and 8:00 am, so they are unable to respond to crises 24/7. Additionally, they only operate at full-time staffing during business hours; on weekends and after 5:00 pm on weekdays the program relies on voluntary overtime staffing, and thus there are significantly fewer teams able to respond during these times. Mental health crises do not only happen during business hours, so an effective alternative crisis response system needs to operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week just like any other emergency responders. Further, even during business hours, the average response time of a PMRT unit is often more than an hour because of inadequate units, making it ineffective in a crisis that requires an immediate response. For this reason, many people feel that calling 9-1-1 is their only option to get immediate help for their loved ones in crisis because a PMRT unit would take too long to respond. An effective and efficient alternative crisis response network requires 24/7 coverage and fast response times.

It is clear that the County needs to expand our PMRT network to provide a feasible alternative to law enforcement for individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. Such an expansion would require financial investment, and the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act (Act) includes an opportunity for states to receive increased federal funding to implement mobile crisis intervention services for people with behavioral health needs. Section 9813 of the Act temporarily increases the federal Medicaid (Medi-Cal)

funding match rate for alternative mobile crisis response services from 50% to 85% for a minimum of three years. This is a significant increase in funding that could give the County the opportunity to finally expand its PMRT services to provide an efficient and timely unarmed response to mental health crises. Additionally, the Act requires that the crisis response services operate 24/7 in order to access the increased funding match, which is a much needed expansion. The Act also allows cities to access these funds by contracting with DMH, allowing them to implement and/or expand their own mobile crisis response systems at a local level.

Over the last year, the Board of Supervisors has made clear their commitment to investing in alternative crisis response for people experiencing mental health crises. The increased federal funding match offered in the American Rescue Plan Act provides the County with the opportunity to expand the Department of Mental Health's PMRT network to a capacity that will operate at all hours of the day and provide a timely response similar to other emergency response units like law enforcement and paramedics. We need to plan to access these funds as soon as they become available so that Los Angeles County residents in crisis will be able to receive a fast, unarmed mobile crisis response at any time of the day or night. It is time to treat mental health emergencies with the same attention and resources that we treat physical health emergencies, and expanding the County's alternative crisis response system is one of the first steps to achieving parity.

WE, THEREFORE MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Mental Health (DMH) and the Chief Executive Officer to do the following:

1. Report back in 60 days with a plan to expand Los Angeles County's alternative crisis response system using the increased federal funding match available beginning in early 2022. The report should include the following:
 - a. A recommended plan to increase the operation hours of the Psychiatric Mobile Response Teams (PMRT) program to 24/7, including the associated costs, staffing needs, and funding sources;
 - b. An analysis of the new federal funding available and a plan to utilize these funds to expand the PMRT program in the areas of the County served by the Los Angeles County Fire Department, prioritizing regions with the worst health inequities and highest needs; and
 - c. A plan to outreach to incorporated cities in the County to explore partnerships with the Department of Mental Health that would allow the cities to access federal funding to implement and/or expand their own alternative crisis response systems
2. Collaborate with the California Department of Health Care Services as needed to access and plan for the increased federal Medicaid funding match available in Section 9813 of the American Rescue Plan Act.

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