

City of Madison: City CARES team for mental health emergencies now answering calls city-wide

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On September 1, 2021, the City of Madison launched its Community Alternative Response for Emergency Services (CARES) Team to respond to nonviolent 911 calls for mental health emergencies. The City announced that CARES Teams, made up of community paramedics and crisis workers, would spend a year learning and innovating before expanding the program in future budgets.

“As we mark six months of discovery and innovation with this important alternative response team, I am pleased to announce that the CARES Team is now responding to mental health emergencies on a City-wide basis,” said Mayor Rhodes-Conway. “We will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of CARES and to expand the program over time.”

The project launched out of Fire Station 3 on Williamson Street to focus on the downtown area, where most calls originate. CARES Teams, which operate during peak hours of 11a.m.-7 p.m., quickly discovered that they had the capacity to broaden their service area outside of the downtown area, and are now responding City-wide, based on availability.

The City can report that CARES Teams have responded to 246 calls for service as of March 11, 2022. The average time on call was 53 minutes. In the absence of the CARES program, these calls would have received a police response. Instead, these calls were fielded by CARES Teams, freeing up police time and resources for criminal activity.

CARES Teams bring a patient-centered approach to their efforts. They help to de-

escalate mental health crises, provide treatment on scene, connect patients with appropriate mental health or medical services in the community, and divert patients from hospitals and jails.

“CARES has been having a lot of success responding to emergency calls and learning about our patients as they progress,” said Alder Arvina Martin. “Fifty-two percent of patients were men, 43 percent women. Sixty-seven percent of patients were white, 14 percent Black, 3 percent Latinx, and 3 percent Asian—reflecting the diversity of our community.”

The City has hired a program manager for CARES who is operating out of Public Health Madison Dane County. The City is also experimenting on the use of fire vehicles with lights and sirens(Ford

Interceptors) to shorten response times. The CARES program intends to expand with an additional team later this year.

Mental health emergencies involving violence or the potential for violence continue to receive a response from the Madison Police Department. All Madison police officers receive comprehensive mental health/crisis intervention training and can connect people to services and effectuate Emergency Detentions when needed. The department also employs six Mental Health Officers with additional expertise to help divert those experiencing acute mental health crisis from the criminal justice system.