

To: **Mayor and City Council**
Through: **Nathan Burkett, City Manager**
From: **Brian Sturgeon, Chief of Police**
Date: **June 14, 2021**

Police Response to Persons with Mental Illness

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Law enforcement officer's response to actual criminal activity or the enforcement of statutes and ordinances is only a small part of their responsibility. Over the past several decades, and even longer in some instances, when a member of society has limited or no resources to address an issue in their life they have relied on police officers to provide assistance. This is because when you call 911, police officers are working and available 24/7, 365 days a year. The water leak at 2:00 a.m. flooding your basement, the bat flying around inside your house, the stranded motorist along the roadway and you just locked yourself out of your car or home are just some of the calls for service your police officers respond to on a daily basis.

Up until the 1960's, West St Paul Police Department transported medical emergency patients to the hospital for emergency treatment. When you locked your keys in your car, we use to unlock all those vehicles until about 1990. However, times change. Society expects different responses from law enforcement over time. Is this any different as it relates to mental illness?

We no longer transport patients to emergency rooms because of the advent of ambulance services staffed by paramedics and emergency medical technicians. These specially trained individuals in emergency medicine provide a much better service to those having a medical emergency than your police officers who specialize in enforcement and investigation of criminal and traffic safety matters.

We continue to respond to persons having mental health issues for a number of reasons, but it is mainly due to the fact that we are available. 24/7, 365 days a year. We believe that it is time to re-evaluate this need and to make sure those with mental health issues in a time of crisis receive the proper care and response for the situation.

West St Paul Police Department has been on the cutting edge of mental health response. We have trained and continue to train all our officers in de-escalation and persuasion strategies, understanding the Autism Spectrum Disorder and other mental health diagnosis, crisis intervention techniques, and other mental health issues. Two of our recent police officers that we have hired have degrees in Psychology. We were the first agency, along with South St Paul, to partner with Dakota County Social Services to implement the Coordinated Response Pilot Program in the county. We were also one of the first in the State of Minnesota to partake in this unique response to the growing need of our community for mental health response.

The Dakota County Chiefs of Police Association (DCCPA) has been talking about the issue of law enforcement responding to mental health related service call for years now and see the need for change. We are not the only ones either. The mayor's groups in Dakota County, Dakota County City Managers and Administrator group, Dakota County Social Services, National Alliance on Mental Illness, along with local, state, and federal elected official have all indicated the need to do things different. This change is on the forefront now based on societal demands. Attached to this Council memo is a narrative but together by the DCCPA that was presented to the Dakota City Administrators and Managers Association last month. It lays out our vision on the growing demands for the proper mental health response.

Mental health services is the primary responsibility of Dakota County Social Services and an on-scene response to non-criminal and non-violent incidents of mental health issues should be a social workers responsibility.

We do understand that with mental health, there is a potential for aggression by the patient. We also understand that our response will still be needed in most of these situations to make sure there are no safety hazards for the civilian responders and to keep everyone safe to the best of our ability. However, law enforcement should be a supportive role and not the primary role in these instances.

We also recognize the lack of capacity by Dakota County Social Services or any other private social service provider to act as the primary on scene responder. We are committed to work together to provide the proper response model to meet societal demands.

It is our belief and stance that Dakota County must make the proper commitment to increase capacity to provide the needed services to those suffering from mental illness. Again, we are talking about health, not a criminal offense. Law enforcement in West St Paul changed the response to a person's physical health condition in the 1960's. We need to come together once again to change the response to another health condition, this time a mental health condition.

By working together with various stakeholders, we can change the way mental health is addressed in Dakota County and here in West St Paul. This includes:

- When there is no threats of violence, no weapons present, and no immediate safety issues, the primary response to mental illness should be the responsibility of Dakota County Social Services, specifically the Crisis Response Unit. We know capacity of the Crisis Response Unit cannot provide these services at this time, but capacity building needs to take place in order to provide these services.
- There are individuals who are down, just want to talk to someone, or needs some type of evaluation and plan implemented. Those individuals should be transferred by the 911 answering point (i.e. Dakota Communication Center) directly to the 24 hour Dakota County Crisis Response Unit (952-891-7171) which is staffed by trained social workers in crisis response and evaluations.
- Support Dakota County Social Service's request to the Dakota County Commissioners for increased funding for capacity building for their Crisis Response Unit. This will take time, but eventually a social worker or other health care worker should be in the leading role when responding to mental health issues.
- Continue the support of the Coordinated Response Program between West St Paul Police Department and Dakota County Social Services to reduce the calls to 911 from individuals by making sure the proper services are being provided to members of our community in order to

stabilize their mental health illness.

FISCAL IMPACT:

		Amount
Fund:		None
Department:		
Account:		

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff would like to hear comments from Council on this issue and encourage additional feedback and/or ideas to move forward.