

Mental health workers join Denver police officers to help divert people to treatment instead of jail

denverpost.com



In a file photo, Denver police officers detain a man suspected of being intoxicated on the 16th Street Mall on January 30, 2015.

Denver Post file

In a file photo, Denver police officers detain a man suspected of being intoxicated on the 16th Street Mall on January 30, 2015.

By [Jennifer Brown](#) | jbrown@denverpost.com

PUBLISHED: September 2, 2016 at 5:33 pm |

UPDATED: September 3, 2016 at 11:01 am

Mental health workers are joining Denver police on foot and in their patrol cars to help handle calls involving people in mental health crisis, a new program aimed at getting people into treatment instead of sending them to jail.

The six social workers and clinicians are employees of the Mental Health Center of Denver but work at Denver police headquarters through the partnership, called the “co-responder” program. The \$500,000 initiative, funded through grants and other money from Denver Human Services, is part of the city’s crisis intervention and response unit specializing in mental and behavioral health calls.

The three agencies launched a test phase of the co-responder program in April, pairing social workers with police officers to see how well they worked together. It was a success: the first teams have responded to 427 calls and of those, 408 resulted in linking people to treatment or social services instead of booking them in jail. The program is now fully staffed at six, though officials hope to expand.

Teams will work citywide, but will concentrate on downtown, including the 16th Street Mall, and southeast Denver. They start foot patrols next week along the mall, Denver’s top tourist attraction but also a gathering place for many who are homeless and have mental illness. After a rash of incidents, Denver officials this summer have [increased police foot patrols](#) and hired private security officers to work 16th Street.

The teams will respond to 911 calls involving suspected mental health issues — “whether it’s a naked guy in a parking lot with a samurai sword or someone making suicidal statements,” said Scott Snow, director of the crisis services division at the Denver Police Department. In recent years, police across the country have increasingly been called to handle situations involving mental illness with little training, he said.

“They are not clinicians. At the end of the day, they are cops,” Snow said.

Colorado law allows an officer to place someone on an involuntary mental health hold only if the person is in imminent danger of hurting themselves or someone else, or is gravely disabled. Jail is the only other option in many cases, Snow said.

But co-responder teams have found that the mental health professional is often able to ask different questions that result in the person agreeing to treatment. In one recent case, a team responded to a person screaming on 16th Street Mall. Using his laptop, the mental health worker discovered the person was a current patient at the Mental Health Center of Denver and had been off medication for a week. The person’s case manager arrived and took him to the mental health center.

“Our missions are actually the same thing,” said Chris Richardson from the mental health center, one of the

six mental health workers and the supervisor. “We play off of each other. It’s a collaborative effort.”

About 25 percent of Denver jail inmates on any given day, which is 500-550 people, are receiving psychiatric care or medication for mental illness, said Simon Crittle, sheriff’s spokesman. Many of them were picked up for trespassing or failure to appear in court, and they are picked up repeatedly, spending days or even months behind bars.

The new program is an example of law enforcement initiatives nationwide aimed at improving police response to people in mental health crisis. In July, the Denver Sheriff Department said it was sending nearly 700 deputies to a 40-hour [crisis intervention training program](#), at a cost of about \$1 million.

Denver police made similar training mandatory in 2012; now 98 percent of officers are trained in crisis intervention.

As part of the collaboration, Denver Human Services has two workers stationed at Denver’s jails to link inmates who are leaving to mental health services, as well as housing and food assistance.

Jennifer Brown

Jennifer Brown is an investigative reporter for The Denver Post, where she has worked since 2005. She has written about the child welfare system, mental health, education and politics. She previously worked for The Associated Press, The Tyler Morning Telegraph in Texas, and the Hungry Horse News in Montana.

[Follow Jennifer Brown @jbrownDPost](#)

[Digital & Driveway Delivery - 50% Off](#)