Johnson County Co-Responders
County approves FY2018 budget
Johnson County’s Co-Responder program
New solutions for law enforcement’s interactions with mental health
by CHRIS DEPUISOIR

The Johnson County Co-Responder program deploys a mental health professional who is embedded with police personnel and responds on-site with law enforcement when mental illness is identified as a factor in a call. Individuals who suffer from a mental illness are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. This innovative program effectively provides follow up and engagement with people to get them into local services and prevent them from being incarcerated, ending up in emergency rooms or potentially involved in continued police interactions.

In 2010, when Johnson County received a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, the county’s co-responder program was born. The first local government to participate and implement a co-responder was the city of Olathe, the second largest city in the county, keeping the program going even after exhausting the grant funds. “Continued funding by the city of Olathe once the grant ended was an indication of the great value they saw and received in the co-responder program,” said Assistant County Manager Maury Thompson.

What is a Co-Responder
A co-responder is a Johnson County Mental Health Center (JCMHC) employee, who is embedded in one or more county law enforcement agencies. The goal is to address and de-escalate situations in the field alongside law enforcement officers. These Masters-level mental health clinicians meet the Kansas statute requirements of Qualified Mental Health Professionals, although their individual degrees, backgrounds and specialties may vary. They are trained to make quick assessments and provide crisis intervention at the scene of an emergency. While co-responders are employees of JCMHC, cities or jurisdictions fund the position, paying for the technology and clinical skill these professionals bring.

The mental health co-responder has an office within a law enforcement department, although they aren’t sworn officers and do not dress in police uniforms. By having offices with a partnering law enforcement agency, the mental health staff is able to build trust and communication with police colleagues. They also provide training for officers and offer techniques on the best ways to respond to persons who may have a mental illness. The co-responder receives additional training to acclimate to this unique position including non-emergency driving training, radio usage, ride-a-longs and use of police department computer systems.

The co-responder has access to electronic medical record information which can provide pertinent information in response to a call. The clinician always works in the field alongside law enforcement, never alone, and only once a scene is deemed safe. These professionals have a range of key skills and qualities including comfort in managing high-risk situations, excellent diagnostic skills for adults and minors, understanding of and working within HIPAA, expert knowledge of community resources and more.

Goals and community impact
The goal of the co-responder program is to identify and address the needs of mentally ill individuals in their interactions with law enforcement. As a result, communities hope to reduce unnecessary arrests or trips to emergency rooms as default solutions for dealing with mentally ill residents. Avoiding the emergency room also decreases the likelihood of a situation escalating since law enforcement is not having to take the person into custody. The program helps people access services more quickly in an attempt to reduce future contact with law enforcement.

“Not only does the co-responder program save local officers time that they can dedicate to law enforcement activity, but the person with a mental illness receives the assessment and treatment they need.”
— Assistant County Manager Maury Thompson
Thompson, “but the person with a mental illness receives the assessment and treatment they need.”

After incidents, the co-responder can help to coordinate care for people. They can utilize the JCMHC Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT) to engage struggling persons to consider or enter services. Community partners such as hospitals, EMS and others can meet with clients and treatment providers to introduce the co-responder and crisis intervention team to open discussions and participate in crisis planning.

Co-responders can reach out to suicide survivors (family and friends) a few weeks after a completed suicide to check in with survivors and see if they need any resources. In addition, to help reduce the effects of trauma, co-responders are also starting follow up after significant events. With the Overland Park fire this spring, a co-responder on the scene as well as three co-responders participated in a community support group the following weekend.

Moving forward

The program started at the county level from discussions with the criminal justice coordinator and the city of Olathe and has expanded over the past seven years. The Overland Park Police Department joined the program three years later. In 2016, the cities of Lenexa and Shawnee added a co-responder, sharing one mental health professional. Earlier this year, the program expanded to 14 cities and then another shared co-responder was added for northeast Johnson County cities: Fairway, Leawood, Merriam, Mission, Mission Hills, Mission Woods, Prairie Village, Roeland Park, Westwood and Westwood Hills. Existing partners are making more changes too. That’s seven cities and 10 police departments partnering with a Johnson County co-responder. In addition, Med-Act, Johnson County’s emergency medical service, shares a community outreach clinician co-responder to assist on emergency medical calls.

This summer, the city of Olathe added a part-time co-responder, funded through the Olathe Health System. In January 2018, Lenexa and Shawnee will each have a full-time professional and Overland Park will have a second full-time co-responder, providing them with 16 hours of co-responder coverage.

In addition, Johnson County Mental Health has partnered with the Johnson County EMS System Medical Director Program, which provides medical oversight to all Fire and EMS agencies in the county, providing the EMS System a co-responder that works specifically with Fire and EMS agencies to address frequent utilizers of 911 and those Fire/EMS patients who have mental illness and substance abuse issues.

“Allowing our prehospital providers to have access to a qualified mental health professional for patients with complex social needs is a true asset. This collaboration between mental health and EMS is a big breakthrough that is long overdue,” said Ryan Jacobsen MD, medical director, Johnson County EMS System. “Many of our patient’s needs are not met by a simple ride in the ambulance to the hospital. The program creates another option for patients to get the help they need.”

Over time, local resources such as hospital beds for inpatient mental health facilities and the ability to hold people for involuntary detoxification have decreased. According to Johnson County Mental Health, as the demand for mental health services has increased, funding has decreased, leading to cuts in services, including emergency mental health services.

Information is collected and used to maintain and expand the local co-responder programs because of its successful outcomes. The data that current co-responders enter in the JCMHC electronic medical record software is essential to maintaining clinical history and treatment coordination after mental health interactions, including contact, if an arrest or emergency room was avoided, if substance abuse is indicated, or suicide threats or attempts.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human services, approximately one in five American adults will have a mental health problem in any given year. Knowing that, the local community’s need to respond to mental health emergencies in a compassionate, appropriate manner is key. Johnson County continues to meet the community’s challenges and needs through the co-responder program.

If you or someone you know is having a mental health emergency, please call 913-268-0156.

For inquiries into the co-responder program, contact Jessica Murphy at 913-826-4200.

WEB EXTRA

Check out a video about the co-responder program online at jocogov.org/jocomag.