Specialized Policing Responses:  
Law Enforcement/Mental Health Learning Sites

Jurisdictions across the country are exploring strategies to improve the outcomes of encounters between law enforcement and people with mental disorders. These efforts took root in the late 1980s, with the emergence of crisis intervention teams and co-response models. As a growing number of communities engage in the development of specialized policing responses (SPR), many grapple with the program design process, and are unsure how to tailor models from other jurisdictions to best fit their distinct circumstances.

In an effort to expand the knowledge base for law enforcement agencies interested in starting or enhancing a SPR, with assistance from a team of national experts and the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center selected six police departments from across the country to act as national law enforcement/mental health learning sites. These learning sites represent a diverse cross-section of perspectives and program examples, and are dedicated to helping other jurisdictions across the country improve their responses to people with mental illnesses.

Los Angeles (CA) Police Department

Total number of agency personnel: 12,909
   Sworn: 9,959  Civilian: 2,950
Total population served: 4 million people
Jurisdiction and state: Los Angeles, California

Program Highlights

• Multilayered approach that includes co-response teams, follow-up case managers, and triage/dispatch operators
• Embedded mental health professionals
• Comprehensive data collection and information sharing procedures
• Robust training strategy that includes 40-hour mental health intervention training
• Mental Health Crisis Response Program Advisory Board

With more than 100 active participants, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)’s Mental Evaluation Unit (MEU) is one of the nation’s largest co-response law enforcement mental health operation. Its Crisis Response Support Section (CRSS) includes its Systemwide Mental Assessment Response Teams (SMART), the Case Assessment Management Program (CAMP), the Triage Desk, and the School Threat Assessment Response Teams (START). It is a unique operation that deploys professionals from divergent disciplines who work as a team with the goal of appropriately responding to calls for service involving people suffering from mental health crises.

For more than four decades, the LAPD has deployed its MEU to assist patrol officers with mental health calls. In 1993, Los Angeles was one of the first communities to develop and implement SMART, its police/mental health co-responder team. SMART was designed to help uniformed officers respond to people experiencing a mental health crisis and link them to appropriate mental health services.
In 2005, the LAPD expanded its MEU in response to a growing number of calls for service for people with mental disorders, which was causing a consistent drain on the city’s emergency resources. CAMP was implemented to help identify, track, and develop customized long-term intervention strategies on a case-by-case basis with the hope of minimizing violent encounters with emergency first responders. CAMP pairs police detectives with psychologists, nurses, and social workers from the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health.

The MEU also maintains its long-established Triage Desk, which fields calls from patrol officers seeking assistance for managing situations involving people with mental illnesses. In such circumstances, the triage officer consults the MEU database to learn if the person in question has a history of contact with the police. A triage mental health nurse sits alongside the officer and can check the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health databases to identify the case manager, psychiatrist, or treatment centers. Collectively, the triage staff determines whether to send out a SMART officer or have the patrol officer take the person directly to a mental health facility. Whenever LAPD personnel come in contact with a person who is suffering from a mental health crisis, they must contact the Triage Desk for assistance. The Triage Desk also completes a detailed incident report. If the Triage Desk determines that a person has repeatedly contacted police (or has been the subject of frequent calls for intervention), it will refer the person to the CAMP coordinator for follow-up. The MEU works to prevent unnecessary incarcerations and/or hospitalization of individuals with a mental illness by accessing alternate care in the least restrictive environment through a coordinated and comprehensive systemwide approach.

The School Threat Assessment Response Teams (START) program is a sub-component of the case assessment management program. It was implemented in 2008 to prevent incidents of targeted school violence. Working closely with all educational institutions, START coordinates response and investigations involving all cases of suspected targeted school violence. START also actively engages in training and in spearheading a joint threat assessment committee with the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Follow the program on the unit’s official Twitter account @LAPDMEU.

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To learn more about the Law Enforcement/Mental Health Learning Sites, please visit csgjusticecenter.org/mental-health/learning-sites/ or contact Nicola Smith-Kea at nsmithkea@csg.org or (240) 915-9718.