

Chris Richardson (00:43):

I think what started this whole going down a partnership with behavioral health supports was really the Department of Safety recognizing that we don't have the tools for a different approach to engage individuals in crisis that are experiencing behavioral health needs. We have just enough education and expertise, but we don't know the system navigation. We don't know the resources available. As we developed these behavioral health interventions, there was those gaps that we were seeing. And so we saw substance use being one, so the Substance Use Navigators or the SUN Team was created as a way to help individuals and help officers specifically navigate the pathway to individuals accessing treatment. The early intervention team was really created as a way to engage individuals that were experiencing homelessness on the street that police were having contact with, and how do you engage them, get them resourced, get them connected to services?

Chief Ron Thimas (01:38):

So I think the collaboration is tremendous. I'm thankful for our partnership with WellPower. They are the ones that are providing that level of expertise, those individuals that are riding with police officers and able to step in and engage and resolve those conflicts and de-escalate those situations. And really be the expert in the room when we encounter those situations.

Chris Richardson (02:01):

And that partnership started with just three clinicians going to a district and saying, "We're here to help support." And that relationship and just being able to approach people in a different way, in a different way than law enforcement is used to and accustomed to. We started seeing reductions in individuals that were constantly calling 9-1-1, all of a sudden they weren't doing it anymore.

Chief Ron Thimas (02:20):

Well, there's tremendous value and I think we have a tremendous spectrum of response and care from both our CIT response for the officers that have specialized training to be able to respond and engage with folks, and then continuing to having co-responders. WellPower individuals that are riding along with officers and able to step in and have that behavioral health response to situations. And then beyond that, having the STAR Van available to us so that in situations that don't have a component of violence, that they can respond and be the better, most appropriate response to a particular acute crisis situation.

Chris Richardson (03:04):

As we started seeing a different way that we were engaging populations, that we were able to get them connected to behavioral health treatment, when that person says, "Hey, I'm ready to make a change", we're able to help supply that access to that in a very low barrier way. That's when officers were like, "Well, this was a better outcome. We want this to be a thing. We want this to be part of our culture. We want this to be a philosophy that we stand behind." And seven years later, the Denver Police Department, the Department of Safety have really backed that by saying, "We want clinical support in different areas and different specialties that really do enhance the likelihood that someone in crisis that comes across first responder radar, that they do have access points to those services."

Chief Ron Thimas (03:44):

I think the officers, from what I've heard, see tremendous value. I mean, they recognize that they're not expert in these situations. And they are thankful that there are experts that either are riding with them or that are just a phone call away, where we can have people that know how to engage with and deal with people that are in acute crisis. Then they quickly get them to the appropriate sources to help them. Our officers are not mental health clinicians. Certainly, they get training on how to de-escalate situations, but

they don't come with that level of expertise that those folks from WellPower have and those folks that are riding on the STAR Van have. And so we're thankful for that partnership, because they really are able to step in.

Chris Richardson ([04:29](#)):

I think the uniqueness that comes with being able to have that first responder perspective in going to these type of calls is you have organizations across the city that are doing amazing work with populations, and they still sometimes have need for assistance. And so when a co-responder or STAR shows up, we get to provide that trauma-informed specific approach. It allows law enforcement to stay in the function of safety.

Chief Ron Thimas ([04:56](#)):

The beauty of the partnership, having them ride with those officers all day long is sometimes we don't know. The dispatcher doesn't know when they receive a call for service that there is some kind of mental health component, or some substance abuse component. And so having that individual there to step in when the officer arrives and identifies that, "Yes, there is another challenge here. There is someone who's in crisis and needs help." And I'm not the expert here, and that person can step in and be helpful.