

# EMBEDDING PEERS IN A POLICE/ MENTAL HEALTH CO-RESPONDER PROGRAM: MASSACHUSETTS (WESTERN)



**“Peer support exists to help people find their voice — to say what they want and need to thrive in the community.”**

—Candace Lafever, Peer Support Specialist

## VISION

Behavioral Health Network (BHN) is the regional behavioral health authority for 29 cities and towns including and surrounding Springfield in western Massachusetts. In addition to a crisis call center, a peer-run Living Room model crisis walk-in center, crisis stabilization units, and mobile crisis teams, BHN works with police departments to dispatch behavioral health clinicians to co-respond to behavioral health related 911 calls. TTI funding is being used to augment the co-response program by adding peer support specialists and expand efforts to divert individuals from hospital emergency departments and jails. Peer specialists can provide the additional support people need to remain in the community and help them receive the level of care they need to succeed.

## JAIL DIVERSION APPROACH


Six behavioral health clinicians are embedded in police departments in the region and co-respond to 911 calls. Augmenting clinicians, peer support specialists may accompany them to co-respond to calls assisting in de-escalation, assessment, and referral to care. Peers are uniquely equipped, based on their lived experience, to persuade individuals in crisis to participate in treatment.

Peer support specialists also contact individuals the next day, whether or not they responded to the initial 911 call, to offer on-going support and connection to care. They develop rapport with individuals and may refer them to other services that they need to live in the community, such as housing and food assistance. In some cases, individuals served by this program have called the peer support specialist instead of 911 to prevent or resolve a new crisis, averting the potential for arrest or hospital emergency department use.

## MEASURING PROGRESS

As reported in the application this project is seeking to reduce the overuse of 911 and hospital emergency departments. The project proposed to measure the number of behavioral health related 911 calls that are repeatedly from the same location, and the number of interactions that peer support specialists have during each shift, including follow up contacts.

## INTEGRATION WITH CRISIS SYSTEM


BHN has integrated this project into its crisis response system (as illustrated in Figure 1). Peer support specialist co-responders make and receive referrals across crisis 

**FIGURE 1: BHN CRISIS SERVICES**

**24/7 Crisis Line**

Contact BHN Crisis Services 24 hours per day for help: Call (413) 733-6661 or walk in: 417 Liberty Street, Entrance B, Springfield MA 01104


BHN's Crisis Program provides 24/7 front line response to individuals of all ages who are experiencing a behavioral health crisis, regardless of insurance. BHN provides services on a mobile basis, including home and community-based settings or in an emergency department when needed.



**The Living Room**

Provided at no-cost, The Living Room connects those in crisis with peer mentors at the onset of a crisis, often helping to avoid an emergency.


**Information**



**Stabilization Services**

Short-term, out-of-home placements offer stabilization in a home-like, supervised environment.

**Information**



**Crisis Intervention**

A solution for immediate help to the person in crisis and their family. BHN assists callers in deciding next steps for the individual in crisis.

**Information**

services and systems including a crisis line, a peer run Living Room walk-in center, crisis stabilization units, and mobile crisis teams.

**BEHAVIORAL HEALTH EQUITY**

For some people, particularly those with limited access to quality health care, encounters with law enforcement because of untreated behavioral health disorders can lead to incarceration or involuntary detention. Co-responding with law enforcement, clinicians and peer support specialists can change the course of those encounters by providing alternatives to hospitalization or arrest, and engaging individuals in treatment. To welcome them, BHN has recruited a diverse peer workforce that looks like the people that they serve.

**PROJECT LEGACY**

Due to the success of this project, peer support specialists will continue to augment clinicians in co-responding to 911 crisis calls and providing follow up support. The peer embedded crisis co-responder program is viewed as another important component of the crisis response system and providing an additional gateway to care.

**WHAT HAS EMBEDDING PEER SUPPORT IN A CO-RESPONDER DIVERSION PROGRAM TAUGHT US?**

The addition of peer support specialists to the co-responder model has been relatively seamless, owing to the strong collaborative relationship already established between BHN and police departments. Peer support specialists have mostly experience respect and appreciation from police during co-responder calls and have had little to no resistance. Individuals who are accustomed to calling 911 when they are in crisis are encouraged to call the peer support specialist instead. Peer support specialists report that they receive more calls as rapport develops.

**For more information on this project contact Robert Walker at [Robert.Walker@Massmail.state.ma.us](mailto:Robert.Walker@Massmail.state.ma.us).**