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- Fontana Police Department develops unique new program to help people who undergo mental health crisis

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Mical John, Editor 99

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Throughout the nation, tragedies have occurred in which persons who are going through a mental health crisis are shot during encounters with police officers.

In Fontana, the Police Department is determined to avoid such incidents, and that's why a unique new program to help mentally ill and homeless people has been created.

The Community Outreach and Support Team (C.O.A.S.T.), which was launched on July 1, is one of the first "of its kind in the nation," said Officer Mike Hall of the Fontana P.D. in a Facebook video.

The P.D. is partnering with the **San Bernardino County Fire Department** and the San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health to coordinate C.O.A.S.T. in an effort to re-imagine how first responders and social workers interact with people suffering from mental illnesses, Hall said.

Representatives from those three agencies, along with a support dog, will go out into the field whenever police receive a crisis call. The goal is to respond immediately instead of using a referral system, Hall said.

Because they want to be involved with the public in a non-threatening manner, the C.O.A.S.T. team members will be wearing civilian clothing, Hall said.

The team will also be providing follow-up services through the county as well as nonprofit groups like CityLink in Fontana.

"We're excited to go out in the community and do outreach and provide resources for those who are in a mental health crisis and experiencing homelessness," Hall said.

The C.O.A.S.T. team thanked Fontana Police Chief Billy Green and Fire Department Chief Jeff Birchfield for their support of the program.

— GREEN pushed for the idea to be implemented after receiving input from the Fontana Police Chief's Roundtable committee that was created one year ago in the wake of concerns created when a police officer in Minnesota killed an unarmed man, George Floyd. The incident led to widespread protests throughout the nation, including some in Fontana.

The committee, which is comprised of Fontana residents who are not affiliated with the Police Department, was looking for ways to bridge the gulf between officers and some of the citizens they serve.

After discussions among themselves, the committee members asked: “If money and time were no object, what would we like to see to improve situations that would be the scariest, and the very first thing we tackled was the mental health issue,” said Susan Poole, the chair of the committee.

“The police are charged with responsibilities far beyond their capabilities. They aren’t trained for mental health issues. We were able to shine the light on this and raise the importance of it, and the chief now thinks it was brilliant to bring this to the forefront.”

In a video message in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month, Green said: “We at the Fontana Police Department are working hard to develop the necessary resources, education, and support to assist citizens within our community who suffer from mental illness.”

Poole said Green utilized the committee’s research and developed the plan for C.O.A.S.T., which incorporated some of the same approaches that have been carried out by other cities and states.

Kendra Flores-Carter, another member of the committee, said that because the county’s Department of Behavioral Health was already overwhelmed with calls for service, she asked if the Fontana P.D. could have its own in-house person who could respond to difficult situations.

“We need a mental health specialist to deal with mental health emergencies,” she said, “and leave the police resources for the really serious crime activities that are happening.”

When Green reported that the City Council approved the collaborative effort with Hall, the Fire Department, and the Behavioral Health Department, the committee members were thrilled.

“We were so excited when he shared that information with us,” Flores-Carter said, “and it shows how, as a team, we are already being very impactful.”

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