

PD Editorial: Santa Rosa's mobile crisis team goes 24/7

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A inRESPONSE mobile support team heads to a call. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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The year is ending with wonderful news. Santa Rosa's mobile crisis response program not only survived the city's financial headwinds; it's expanding to 24/7 operations.

The three-year-old crisis program called InResponse assists people, many of them homeless, who are experiencing behavioral health crises or other challenges. These are incidents that don't really need handling by law enforcement, or sometimes firefighters, but before InResponse, there was no one else to call.

InResponse is part of a nationwide realization that communities need intervention alternatives beyond police, who despite expanded training are not social workers. Programs like InResponse take a patient-centered approach, deploying trained crisis workers instead of armed officers and connecting individuals to needed services with follow-up. That method frees law-enforcement officers to deal with crime and other public safety threats. It also routes fewer people through the court system and decreases the number of incidents that might escalate into police use of force.

Mobile response teams also have been formed in Rohnert Park, Cotati, Petaluma and unincorporated Sonoma County.

InResponse succeeds because its three-person teams include a mental health professional, a paramedic and an outreach specialist. They respond to calls involving behavioral health issues, welfare checks, potential suicides, homelessness and other issues.

Forty percent of last year's 4,759 calls primarily involved mental health. Each of them was one less call that police, fire and emergency medical units did not have to roll out for.

InResponse handled all those calls while running just two shifts. One van operates from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and the other from noon to 10 p.m. The new night shift will run from 9:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m.

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With Santa Rosa's ongoing budget problems, this expansion comes as surprising and welcome news. Give credit to local leaders for understanding the value of InResponse. It has support from such agencies as Buckelew Programs, Catholic Charities, the Santa Rosa Fire Department and the Sonoma County Behavioral Health Division.

The model for such programs is CAHOOTS — Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets — which launched in 1989 in Eugene, Oregon, as a partnership between White Bird Clinic and the city's public safety system. A White Bird crisis worker and a medic were dispatched to 911 calls involving a range of behavioral health and nonemergency issues.

That CAHOOTS ever got off the ground is itself a social and political miracle. Founded years earlier as a counterculture collective serving people at risk of falling through society's cracks, White Bird had been viewed with suspicion by law enforcement and the Eugene establishment.

Santa Rosa hired CAHOOTS as a consultant to help InResponse. There was no guarantee that success would translate to Santa Rosa. It did, in large part, because local leaders were able to create a mobile response program tailored to local needs.

Now, three years later, it remains a success. There's nothing wrong with borrowing a good idea from elsewhere to make progress on a seemingly intractable problem. Homelessness remains an issue, but crisis incidents are handled much better today.

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