

A new lifeline: Santa Rosa mental health crisis team expanding to 24/7

Santa Rosa's InResponse program, which provides mental health crisis care and support, will expand to a 24/7 schedule starting Dec. 29, offering around-the-clock assistance to individuals in need across Sonoma County.



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(From left) inRESPONSE Mental Health Support Team members Seth Glover, a Santa Rosa Fire paramedic, Cavan Nelson, an engagement specialist from Catholic Charities, Mariah King, a Sonoma County Behavioral Health Clinician, check on a client at Caritas Homes in Santa Rosa Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2024. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)



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On a recent afternoon, Sonoma County Behavioral Health therapist Matthew Taylor glanced at the dispatch system as a new call came through for the InResponse team.

“Is this the teenager?” he asked aloud, recognizing the person from a previous interaction.

“We have to take a very soft approach,” paramedic Jake Ortlinghaus added as the two sat in their Sonoma Avenue office.

Moments later, they were in the van — Taylor taking quick bites of his spiced “kickin chicken” — on their way to repeat a scene that plays out eight to 12 times a day: a therapist, paramedic and outreach

How to get help

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis in Santa Rosa, call the InResponse Mental Health Support Team at 707-575-HELP (4357)

specialist arriving to de-escalate a crisis, or pre-crisis, and offer support.

Starting Sunday, the team will be able to answer these calls around the clock. Santa Rosa’s InResponse program is set to expand to a 24/7 schedule, a long-anticipated step that could transform access to mental health, homelessness and social work care in Sonoma County.

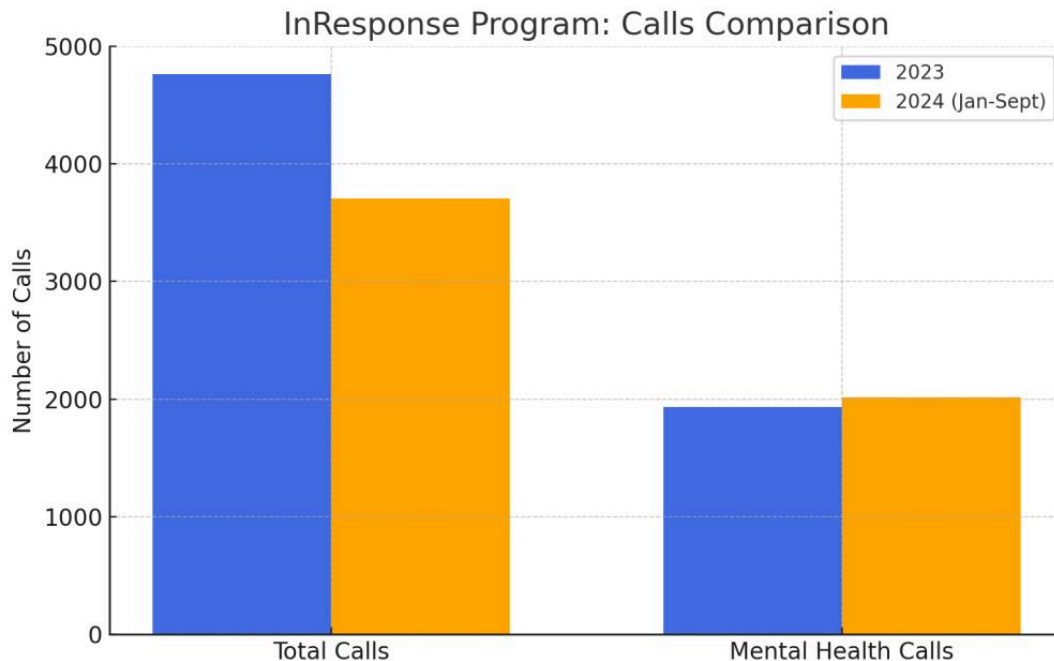
“A lot of the times families or individuals just try to white knuckle it through the overnights,” said Wendy Tapon, a Sonoma County Behavioral Health client care manager and InResponse team lead. “With a team that’s 24/7... there’s another option.”

“My hope,” she added, “is that we will be utilized and that people won’t suffer alone.”

A different approach to crisis response

Launched in January 2022, InResponse takes a civilian, multidisciplinary approach to calls involving mental health crises, substance use and other “gray area” situations — cases where care, not law enforcement, is often the appropriate intervention.

The program emerged amid growing calls to reform following the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Modeled after Eugene, Oregon’s CAHOOTS program, InResponse deploys teams of mental health professionals, paramedics and outreach specialists with support from agencies like Buckelew Programs, Catholic Charities, the Santa Rosa Fire Department and the Sonoma County Behavioral Health Division.



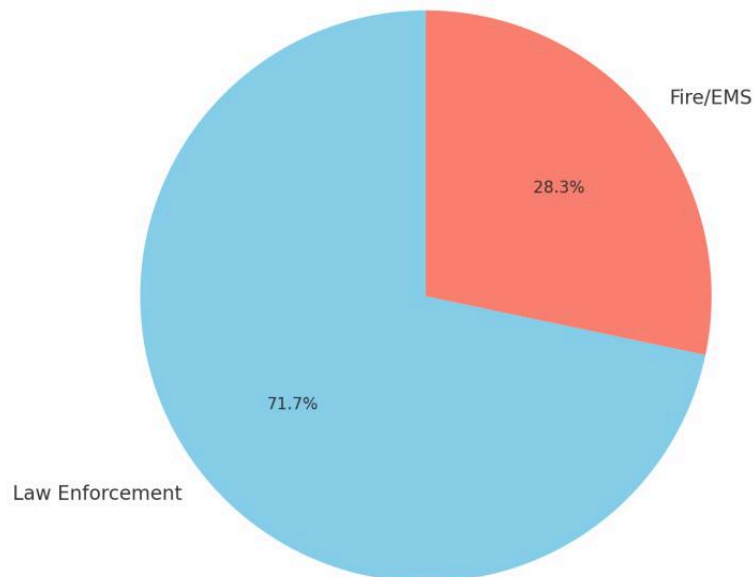
In 2023, the program responded to 4,759 calls, with 1,931 primarily involving mental health care. From January through September of this year, the team responded to 3,702 calls — 2,018 focused on mental health and 492 on homelessness-related care. There is often overlap in the type of services provided.

The program’s impact on emergency services has been significant. Last year, 3,568 calls were diverted from law enforcement and 1,408 from fire and emergency medical services. Santa Rosa police Lt. Chris Mahurin described the program as a win-win for both responders and the community.

InResponse limits the number of calls police respond to, reduces the potential for use-of-force incidents, while “increasing the amount of people getting the service they genuinely need,” Mahurin said.

InResponse Program: 2023 Diverted Calls

This chart shows the percentage of calls diverted from law enforcement and fire/EMS in 2023, demonstrating the program's impact.



A long-awaited 24/7 expansion

The move to 24/7 care fulfills a long-standing goal for InResponse. The new night shift — running from 9:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. — was delayed primarily by staffing shortages. Program Director KT Swan said six new team members were recently hired: three for the first half of the week and three for the second.

Currently, two vans cover daytime shifts from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and noon to 10 p.m.

The program's \$3.1 million annual cost has been covered through a mix of federal and local funds. With American Rescue Plan Act funding set to expire this year, Sonoma County has pledged \$1.5 million from Measure O, a tax-funded mental health initiative, to help bridge the gap, Mahurin said. Program leaders are also applying for grants, and the Santa Rosa City Council has said it will step in if additional funding is needed.

The work in action

The InResponse team works as a coordinated unit. During a call, therapist Matthew Taylor looks for signs of mental distress, assessing whether someone needs immediate intervention, longer-term support or both. Paramedic Jake Ortlinghaus focuses on physical health concerns, while outreach specialists like Catholic Charities' Cavan Nelson evaluate basic needs like food, clothing or shelter.

"It's kind of like a symbiotic relationship in the sense of it's working in partnership with the person," Nelson said. "It's not like we are forcing help upon someone."

The team tailors its response to each situation. During a recent call, Taylor gently asked, "Is that something you want to talk about, or should we leave that alone?" They checked the individual's physical health, praised her progress and ensured she had updated mental health resources.

Sometimes the work involves practical tasks: checking refrigerators for food, providing meals or clothing, staying present during a difficult phone call, calling an ambulance — something Ortlinghaus can do without triggering a fire department response — or connecting individuals to InResponse navigators for ongoing care.

The team works across what Swan calls a “whole spectrum of folks,” from those in active crisis to individuals at risk of escalating. Occasionally, a higher level of care is required.

Taylor described 5150 holds — when someone is involuntarily placed in a psychiatric facility for their safety — as a last resort and a difficult but necessary part of the job.

“There's a duty to act if there's concern around safety for themselves or someone else,” Swan explained. “That individual sometimes doesn't have insight around what's happening for them.”

A long-term vision for care

The 24/7 expansion will fill a critical gap: overnight crises. Families and individuals who previously waited until morning to seek help will now have access to care when they need it most.

“Challenges don't arise at a specific time,” Swan said.

After a recent call, Taylor, Ortlinghaus and Nelson reflected on the people they've helped. Some needed only one interaction to seek further care; others took 11.

They're lucky, they said, they get to see people grow or just check on them again.

For the InResponse team, that persistence — and now, the ability to respond at any hour — could make all the difference.

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