

Public Safety & Homeland Security
City Council Committee
April 22, 2021
Houston Police Department – Public Forum

1. What resources have been put into investigating the City shifting from co-responder programs to alternative responder programs?

In March 2021, the Mental Health Division and Emergency Communications Division launched a pilot program that expands the existing Crisis Call Diversion Program. If a call for service meets the eligibility criteria (non-violent and non-criminal), the CCD counselors will send out a Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT) to respond in lieu of a police response. The members of these MCOT's are clinicians employed by The Harris Center, the mental health authority of Harris County. The MCOT clinicians are trained to request law enforcement in the event that they are unable to assist the person in crisis. These calls will be diverted automatically by call-takers. No action is required on the part of officers or supervisors. MCOT clinicians respond to calls for service from persons (adults and juveniles with a legal guardian present) experiencing a mental health crisis or who are at risk for experiencing a mental health crisis and who have significant barriers to accessing mental health services independently. The lessons from this pilot program will be applied to the previously-announced expansion of MCOT.

Note to CM:

***As the Mayor's Task Force solicited various resources in their recommendations on Police Reform for Crisis Intervention (which included data from various sources such as The Harris Center), this question should be diverted to the Mayor's Task Force. While HPD did contribute some data, the Task Force used multiple other sources in making their recommendations.*

2. Is there a plan to use public dollars this year for body cameras?

On April 16, 2021, the City of Houston advertised a Request for Proposals (RFP) to secure the services of a qualified provider of Body Worn Camera Solution and Video Evidence Management System for the Houston Police Department. HPD has secured grant funding and other donations for this project and will seek additional funding through the Capital Improvement process which will involve the use of *some* public dollars.

3. What actionable steps are being taken to ensure police do not respond to mental health calls?

While there is no means to ensure that police will *never* respond to mental health calls, several programs have already been implemented or have been preliminary approved by the Mayor that have the intended impact of removing police officers from certain crisis calls or providing a more specialized response to such calls. These programs are all collaborations with the local mental health authority, the Harris Center, and are all focused on providing a response that focuses on serving the mental health needs of the individual, while still considering the safety of the responders, the individual, and the community at large. Such programs include:

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- Call Crisis Diversion (CCD) – this program is designed to identify and redirect non-emergent, non-life threatening calls away from first responder resources and toward Harris Center tele-counselors located in the Houston Emergency Center.
- Chronic Consumer Stabilization Initiative (CCSI) – this program is a collaborative effort between HPD and the Harris Center and is designed to identify, engage, and provide mental health and social services to individuals that have been diagnosed with serious and persistent mental illness and have frequent encounters with the police.
- Crisis Intervention Response Team (CIRT) – The Crisis Intervention Response Team is a co-responder collaboration between HPD and The Harris Center. A Crisis Intervention Trained (CIT) peace officer and a licensed professional clinician (LPC) ride together and respond to mental health disturbances. Using the skills and education of both, the CIRT units safely de-escalate mental health crises and provide the most informed possible disposition to these calls. CIRT units are also called as support for special threat situations as a resource for the SWAT commander.
- Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT) – A Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (“MCOT”) is a team of mental health professionals that responds to situations involving a person in mental health crisis without the involvement of law enforcement. MCOT can safely respond to 911 calls that involve a mental health nexus so long as there is no indication of violence, weapons, or criminal offenses. This methodology removes law enforcement from handling lower level mental health calls and connects mentally ill individuals with services and professionals that can help them most without involving the police.
- Clinician-Officer Remote Evaluation Program (CORE) - CORE is a telehealth strategy for responding to mental health crisis calls using a tablet and a HIPAA-approved technology platform to connect a law enforcement first responder with a mental health clinician in the community at the time of the 911 dispatch. CORE connects six (6) licensed professional clinicians and a team leader to persons whose mental health crises have brought them in contact with HPD officers. The clinicians can assist the officer in making a quick, accurate mental health assessment. The clinicians can also access the person’s hospitalization history and connect the person with needed resources.

**Public Safety & Homeland Security
City Council Committee
April 22, 2021 Houston Municipal Courts Department – Public Forum**

*Responses provided by Judge J. Elaine Marshall, Director and Presiding Judge, City of Houston
Municipal Courts Department*

1. Are there any legal restrictions stopping the City from remitting full hardships for all eligible cases outright, without having people come in?

There are many legal barriers that restrict us from granting full hardships (I am assuming he is referring to full remittals) without having a person come in. These include

- A person must enter a plea and be admonished of the plea and the effects of the plea.
- Fraud is a big issue, and we are courts of record and must follow the law when it comes to pleas of defendants.
- HIPAA concerns because defendants in some cases will have to submit sensitive documents that could become public records in order to qualify. We are subject to Open Records request and if a defendant sends in personal information it runs the risk of becoming subject to the open records request. Protecting the privacy of the citizen is a legal obligation in many instances.
- At the Houston Municipal Court, there are only three judges assigned to the Safe Harbor court. Many defendants work with a specific judge. If a defendant has multiple cases then the judge works on a subset of cases to make sure a defendant is compliant with the classes or community service before dealing on the next set of cases. Often times the defendants feels as though they are taking responsibility for their actions by working through the pending cases.
- In some instances, a defendant comes to expect cases will be remitted and they have no deterrence for committing similar offenses. The defendant's history should be reviewed periodically.
- Run the risk of fraudulent documents submitted if the defendant not present.

Safe Harbor is a court that the defendant needs to come in, identify himself in open court especially since they are requesting judges to remit fines and fees outright, and without the defendant coming to court it could deprive the defendant of many opportunities that are available.

2. What would be the cost?

We have a mail department, and a budget, and probably won't be a significant cost

3. Is it cost prohibitive?

No but it does pose other non-monetary concerns