

To: Vermont General Assembly
From: Commissioner Michael Schirling, Department of Public Safety
CC: Commissioner Sarah Squirrel, Department of Mental Health
Commissioner James Baker, Department of Corrections
Date: July 17, 2020
Re: Mental Health Outreach Program Expansion (H.961)

Overview & History

For almost two decades Vermont has worked to expand and strengthen partnerships between Law Enforcement, Mental Health, and Social Services. The goal of these partnerships is to ensure the safety of all, to respond effectively and to improve access to services and supports for individuals with mental health needs in the community.

Beginning in Bellows Falls and continuing in a number of locations throughout Vermont, including Burlington, Chittenden County broadly, the St. Albans and Westminster State Police Barracks, these partnerships and programs have included embedded mental health and social workers in State Police barracks, street outreach teams in Burlington, and the Community Outreach Program. The latter began in April 2018 as a collaboration between the Howard Center, and 6 neighboring towns including South Burlington, Colchester, Williston, Winooski, Essex and Shelburne, expanding in 2019 to include Richmond.

With the success of these programs, continued expansion is a critical next step to ensure improved assessment and access to mental health care and treatment in the community for individuals with mental health and other unmet social service needs. It is important to note that those with mental health challenges are not more likely than anyone else to commit violent acts or crime. In fact, it is 10 times more likely that people with severe mental illness will be victims of violent crime than the general population. ⁱ

In January 2020 the Department of Public Safety presented a number of initiatives to modernize the manner in which policing and public safety are delivered in Vermont. Among them was a proposal to expand the mental health/social service outreach program from two barracks to all State Police barracks – with services provided to all communities, not only those served by the State Police. Preliminary planning, prior to the impact of COVID-19 and substantially altered budget predictions, identified shared funding opportunities between the Departments of Corrections (DOC), the Department of Mental Health (DMH), and the Department of Public safety (DPS) to expand this program statewide.

Program Overview

Expanding this mental health outreach program is supported by the DPS, DOC, DMH, the State Police, municipalities, advocates, and other stakeholders. Goals include:

- Improved proactive access to community based intervention.
- Improved assessment of mental health and other issues and timely referral and access to resources, social services and ongoing support.
- Improved collaboration on strategies to more effectively and therapeutically serve individuals during a mental health or other crisis.
- Improved therapeutic de-escalation and police co-response with mental health clinicians throughout the State when law enforcement is informed of an incident involving a person experiencing a possible mental health crisis.

- Providing an enhanced array of de-escalation and problem solving skills and tools that promote proactive responses to crises both with law enforcement and in lieu of law enforcement.
- Providing proactive assistance and therapeutic support to those in repetitive crisis to achieve better outcomes prior to the need for emergency response.
- Reducing the number of calls for law enforcement, emergency medical, fire safety, and hospital emergency department services.

The delivery model is more likely than not to mirror the existing methodology to contract with Designated Mental Health Agencies (DMA) to provide the mental health outreach clinician locally. The DMA works in partnership with DPS and DMH and provides clinical oversight of the clinician's work, as well as providing continuity across the broad spectrum of services that are available and may be needed by each client.

Implementation Considerations

To achieve the optimal impact of mental health outreach program expansion, partners commit to expand regional models that need to be brought to scale statewide. Near-term strategies include but are not limited to:

- Funding the program - including State, municipal, and grant sources where available.
- Review and evaluation of the potential to match funds under Vermont's Medicaid waiver.
- Collaboration with state and community partners to improve the provision of these services to reach better outcomes.
- Collecting, sharing, and analyzing data related to current and ongoing mental health outreach programs being implemented across the state to inform and improve outcomes and future services.
- Developing clear policies and procedures to respond to people who have mental health needs.
- Developing a formal and ongoing process for reviewing and improving performance.
- Providing flexibility at the community level to implement and expand mental health outreach programs based on regional needs, local innovation and resources.

Preliminary Funding Methodology

Program expansion and implementation will occur over a three year period (FY21to FY23) with funding collaboration as outlined above - including State, municipal, and grant sources where available. Eight additional positions are required to ensure coverage at all barracks. Scaling up the program is envisioned to occur on the following approximate schedule (to be accelerated if possible based on funding availability):

- FY21 – 2 additional positions
- FY22 – 2 additional positions
- FY23 – 4 additional positions

This outline is subject to revision as circumstances, funding, and partnership opportunities continue to evolve.

ⁱ <https://www.ncsl.org/blog/2019/12/17/increasing-collaboration-between-police-and-mental-health-professionals.aspx>