

IMPROVED RESPONSES IN PSYCHIATRIC CRISES: THE PSYCHIATRIC EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM PROGRAM

COMMENDATION

SUMMARY

The County of San Diego's Psychiatric Emergency Response Team (PERT) program pairs specially trained law enforcement personnel with licensed mental health professionals to provide an effective and compassionate method for dealing with individuals with mental illness or emotional crises during law enforcement contacts. This program, begun in 1996, has received consistent support from governmental agencies and has continued to grow; there are now 51 budgeted teams that cover every jurisdiction in San Diego County. The 2017/2018 San Diego County Grand Jury commends the PERT program for its services in providing assistance to the community. The Grand Jury appreciates the support PERT receives from the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, Community Research Foundation (CRF) and the Health and Human Services Agency of San Diego County.

DISCUSSION

Prior to the PERT program, when law enforcement personnel responded to a situation involving a mentally troubled individual they were often uncertain how to deal effectively with the incident, not knowing how to react when a person is behaving in an unusual manner. This uncertainty was stressful for the officers and may have resulted in inappropriate responses that made the situation even worse. The CRF, in collaboration with the National Alliance on Mental Illness and San Diego law enforcement agencies, designed a program to help mental health professionals assist in these encounters, provide compassionate care for individuals in distress, and help officers develop competence in dealing with these situations. This program introduced the concept of creating teams by pairing specially trained officers with licensed mental health professionals, called PERT, that could be called in when a situation required their skills. Their training programs include:

- PERT eight-hour training, an introduction to PERT services and an overview of techniques to respond safely and effectively in crisis situations.
- PERT Academy, a three-day intensive program covering policies and procedures, recognizing signs and symptoms of mental illness, and legal and social issues to be considered in interacting with distressed individuals.
- PERT Crisis Response Training (CRT), a 10-hour program focused on developing practical tools to respond safely, effectively, and compassionately to those in crisis.
- Advanced Officer Training (AOT), increasing awareness of how officers can utilize PERT when needed.

In the past three fiscal years PERT has provided formal training for over 4,500 law enforcement and other public safety personnel. In that same time period PERT personnel have also participated in more than 5,600 additional brief training presentations. There are currently 41 PERT-certified officers serving in all jurisdictions in the county.

The PERT program has received continued financial support from the County through the Health and Human Services Agency, using both state and federal funds. It began as a pilot project in the Western Division of the San Diego Police Department (SDPD) in 1996, and expanded to include the SDPD Northern and Central Divisions and several Sheriff substations in 1997. In 1998 PERT was established as a countywide program, and it is now partnered with law enforcement in every jurisdiction in the County. The 2017-2018 budget has allocated funds for 51 teams: 41 of those teams are fully functional, and 10 are currently in training.

The number of PERT responses to crisis calls has continued to increase over the years. In recent years there were 6,208 crisis responses in FY2014-15; 6,752 in FY2015-2016; and 7,852 in FY2016-2017. It is estimated that these interventions have allowed law enforcement to divert approximately 50% of these calls from admission to hospitals or jail bookings. At present over 450 SDPD officers have received PERT training. The Sheriff has directed that all deputies should receive training. Law enforcement agencies throughout the county have expressed their appreciation for the quality of concern and compassionate care that have been provided to those mentally ill or emotionally troubled members of our community who have had encounters with law enforcement.

COMMENDATION

The 2017/2018 San Diego County Grand Jury commends the PERT program for its valuable service to law enforcement agencies and to the citizens of the San Diego County. The Grand Jury also appreciates the support of this program by Community Research Foundation, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, and the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency.