Seattle launches pilot program to tackle mental health calls

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The city of Seattle on Wednesday announced a new pilot program to respond to behavioral health crises. (Esmy Jimenez / The Seattle Times)

By Esmy Jimenez
Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell announced the launch Wednesday of a pilot program to respond to behavioral health crises, alongside leaders from the fire and police departments.

The Community Assisted Response and Engagement dual dispatch program will have six staff responding alongside police to low-level acuity calls in downtown Seattle, from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

The goal is to relieve the stress on police and fire departments who respond to many behavioral health calls, officials said.

“Often, we don’t need a gun badge, we need people trained and skilled,” Harrell said during a news conference.

“This pilot will not change our systems overnight, but it is another tool to advance safety and an important step forward.”

The program has been preparing to launch for about a month under the leadership of Amy Smith, after Harrell allotted $6 million in funding last month.

Staff will respond to welfare checks that are nonviolent and nonmedical, aiming for the CARE team to respond alongside SPD officers with both units dispatched simultaneously. After arriving at the scene and ensuring it is safe, officers can respond to other calls while the CARE responders provide services.

The six workers all have backgrounds in behavioral health and are trained on crisis prevention, de-escalation, first aid and Narcan administration. They also have food, water and socks to hand out to people in need.

Other pilot programs in the region include Health One, a mobile crisis response team through the Seattle Fire Department and two outreach programs through King County Metro and Sound Transit.

A new crisis line, 988 — meant to be a mental health alternative to 911 — launched last year for people in crisis to call and receive immediate help.

The Seattle Police Department already has a small crisis response team that specifically responds to mental and behavioral health calls. An estimated 50% of officers are also certified in Crisis Intervention Training to de-escalate and better serve people in crisis.

Still, it’s not enough, officials said.

“We can have three times as many mental health professionals and [social workers] in this city, and we still would barely be getting after it,” Smith said.

“That’s where we are in the state of crisis,” she said, pointing to overburdened and understaffed programs.
According to officials, there have been 2,686 person-down calls and 5,533 wellness and welfare check calls so far this year.

Officials expect the pilot program will be evaluated in the following months with help from researchers from Seattle University.

_Esmy Jimenez: 206-305-4872 or ejimenez@seattletimes.com; on Twitter: @esmyjimenez._