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Virtual Crisis Care Program Gives South Dakota Law Enforcement 24/7 Access to Mental Health Expertise

PIERRE, S.D. (July, 30, 2020) – Technology will provide South Dakota law enforcement and court services officers with access to mental health expertise in the midst of a crisis, irrespective of the time or place, thanks to \$1 million in pilot funding from The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust.

Under the Virtual Crisis Care pilot program, mental health professionals will assist law enforcement and court services officers in 23 counties in their ability to de-escalate, assess, and stabilize those in a crisis and arrange for their follow-up care with local community mental health centers.

The program partners the South Dakota Unified Judicial System, Avera eCARE, and the Helmsley Charitable Trust in collaboration with the South Dakota Sheriffs' Association and community mental health centers.

Using video conferencing via a tablet with Avera eCARE in Sioux Falls, individuals will receive only the level of care they need, officers will receive help with complex mental health issues they are often not specifically trained to handle, and taxpayers will benefit from fewer costly mental health holds, transports, and hospitalizations.

“This will be an asset for law enforcement who suspect someone may have a mental health issue and for probation officers monitoring people after sentencing,” said South Dakota Chief Justice David Gilbertson, who has championed efforts to integrate technology to better serve individuals with mental health issues. “If we could give access to mental health expertise to professionals throughout the system from attorneys to judges, it could revolutionize the South Dakota criminal justice system.”

More than 60 percent of rural Americans live in areas with a shortage of mental health professionals. At the same time, they must deal with the ongoing challenges of a fluctuating agricultural economy, increasing rural drug abuse, and now the isolation brought on by COVID-19.

“About one in every 10 calls to law enforcement involves someone in a potential mental health crisis. It can be extremely difficult for rural law enforcement officers to deal with these issues,” said Walter Panziner, a Helmsley Trustee. “Helmsley is proud to be on the forefront of increasing access to vital mental health resources for law enforcement officers and the communities they serve.”

Many urban areas across the country have used mobile crisis teams, which include in-person behavioral health professionals, to assist law enforcement in heading off unnecessary visits to emergency rooms or mental health hospitals. Last year in Minnehaha County, in cases where the mobile crisis team responded, nine of every 10 people were able to stay home rather than require a higher level of care.

Despite the effectiveness of mobile programs, only the South Dakota counties of Minnehaha and Hughes operate them. The goal of the pilot is to prove the feasibility of inserting technology into the mobile crisis model so the benefits can be extended statewide.

“Partnering to find innovative solutions to reduce disparities in healthcare access in rural areas is a cornerstone of Avera eCARE’s work,” said Deanna Larson, Avera eCARE CEO. “Across the U.S., there is a growing shortage of psychiatric workforce. At the same time, we see the need for behavioral health care recognized, resulting in an increasing number of requests for services. Virtual Crisis Care is developed to initiate assessment when the call for help comes to first responders and law enforcement officers. The virtual access fills a critical gap, providing on-the-spot access to mental health care services while connecting people to local resources.”

Under the program, law enforcement or probation officers in the field can call the crisis response team at Avera eCARE to request a safety assessment. Officers then provide the person needing help with a tablet for a video session. Once the crisis response team completes the assessment and communicates with law enforcement, they work to establish follow-up care with the local community mental health center.

The program can be used for someone who is delusional, hallucinating, or off medications, for someone making suicidal or homicidal statements, and for someone unable to care for themselves. It would not be used for those who are heavily intoxicated, need medical attention, or are too violent or unwilling to participate.

“Mental health crises can be extremely difficult for law enforcement officers. We are excited to see South Dakota as a leader in finding innovative solutions to equip law enforcement officers with resources to best support the public,” said Staci Ackerman, Executive Director of the South Dakota Sheriffs’ Association. “Virtual Crisis Care will help our officers ensure that those in crisis get the appropriate level of help as quickly as possible.”

The pilot program, which runs through June 2021, will work to prove effectiveness and efficiencies of the Virtual Crisis Care model with the goals of establishing funding and statewide program expansion.