Spokane County Approves New Public Safety Program Championed by Commissioner Jordan

On Tuesday, June 4, 2024, the Board of Spokane County Commissioners voted unanimously to allocate $1.43 million in mental health sales tax funds to expand a medical and mental health crisis response program championed by Commissioner Chris Jordan. The County’s new Co-Responder Pilot Program will pair Fire Department-based first responders with behavioral health professionals to grow capacity for response to mental health emergencies and substance use-related crisis calls. The program is envisioned as a partnership with the City of Spokane Fire Dept. and Spokane Valley Fire Dept.

“This is a win for a safer and healthier Spokane,” said Commissioner Jordan as the Commissioners passed the funding. Jordan also noted that Co-Responder behavioral health teams allow for earlier intervention which eases the pressure on local emergency rooms, law enforcement, and the justice system – all while helping connect people in crisis with life-saving treatment. Additional Co-Responder Teams – comprised of an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)/Paramedic and a mental health professional – will be able to provide medical assessments and behavioral health screenings on the streets to identify a person’s current need, complete medical clearances in the field, provide crisis de-escalation and response, and coordinate transportation to the appropriate resources to help stabilize the individual.

Commissioner Jordan first proposed a budget amendment to fund the program in November 2023 after the idea was introduced by the County’s Community Services Director Justin Johnson. “I’ve heard from police officers that many calls they respond to are driven by addiction and untreated mental health. Now, the County is boosting our region’s behavioral health crisis response which will provide an additional tool to help reduce pressure on law enforcement. I believe we’ll see more folks who are struggling getting help to be healthy and stable, improving community safety as a result.”

At a public meeting on January 23rd, 2023, Ashley Magee, Spokane County’s Integrated Behavioral Healthcare Manager explained: “First responders are typically the first on scene when there is an opioid overdose. That’s a pivotal connection point for getting connected to treatment and resources when someone might be more motivated to do so. Having that ability to respond and connect them in that moment will give us better outcome results for that individual.”

Spokane County’s action approves funding for four additional EMT/Paramedics for the City of Spokane – including Downtown Spokane – and two for the Spokane Valley Fire Department service area. These responders will be paired with six Mental Health Care Providers and one master’s level Clinical Supervisor paid for through the existing Crisis System. With funding approved, the County will continue engagement with the City of Spokane and Valley Fire Department to finalize program agreements.