

CITY OF SEBASTOPOL CITY COUNCIL
AGENDA ITEM REPORT FOR MEETING OF: October 1, 2024

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To: Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers
From: Ronald Nelson, Chief of Police
 Responsible Department: Police
Subject: Discussion and Consideration of City Council Liaison for a West County Homeless and Mental Health Support Team

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

The recommendation is that the City Council approve the appointment of a City Council Liaison and direct the Police Chief to continue monitoring and exploring opportunities for the formation of a West County Homeless and Mental Health support and assistance program similar to a West County Mobile Support Team or a West County SAFE type of team.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department has expressed an interest in the formation of a SAFE or MST type of team to provide homelessness and mental health support services dedicated to the West Sonoma County area to possibly include Sebastopol. This team would possibly be managed by an independent entity.

Recently, during a City Council priority setting conversation, the topic of the formation of a SAFE type of team was mentioned twice. It was included in the Group 1 priority items to work on as part of the response to homelessness:

- *The County is exploring the creation of a West County Mobile Support Team (MST) which would replicate a SAFE-like program and possibly be managed by an independent entity. Other cities have found that about 15% of individuals served by these programs are experiencing homelessness.*

This topic was also included in Group 3 as a topic that we would not be addressing.

The SAFE program is a collaborative effort based on the CAHOOTS model originally deployed in Eugene, Oregon, which is the leading model for emergency crisis intervention and prevention.

The goal of the SAFE team is to address crisis response, prevention and intervention for our most vulnerable community members experiencing mental health issues, substance abuse issues and homelessness. This team is made up of civilian first responders, who will respond to and proactively address calls for service that have traditionally (and unnecessarily) burdened law enforcement, emergency medical services and health care providers. SAFE teams and similar models are currently in use in several cities in Sonoma and Marin Counties.

Services provided by SAFE teams include responding to people who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, in need of treatment for mental illness, or who need shelter by providing counseling and transportation to the appropriate location. The team also addresses minor medical complaints that do not require emergency room care. Left untreated, some of these medical conditions can become severe. The SAFE team is supported by a Coordinator, who will manage referrals and wraparound services with the various social and mental health programs in Sonoma County. The SAFE team is a community resource that runs 24 hours per day, 7 days per week

in the Sonoma County cities using this model. It should be noted that these types of programs are generally designed to complement and not entirely replace homeless outreach staff.

The item tonight is to request Council approval to appoint a City Council Liaison and direct the Chief of Police to continue monitoring and exploring the possibility of the formation of a West County Homelessness and Mental Health support team similar to an MST or SAFE team type of program to address crisis response, prevention and intervention.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

With the limited number of resources available, the initial response for the majority of incidents where a person is experiencing a mental health episode has fallen to police officers to be the first point of contact with these persons. The Treatment Advocacy Center, an advocacy group located in Virginia, estimates that 8.9 million adults suffer from severe mental illness (SMI). Additionally, they estimate that 1 in 4 fatal police encounters involve persons with untreated SMI, and 1 in 5 jail and prison inmates suffer from undiagnosed SMI. It is further estimated that at least 1 in 10 law enforcement responses are involved with persons with SMI.

Previously, police officers received very minimal training regarding responses to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. Generally, the response consisted of arriving on scene, assessing whether the individual was a danger to themselves, or others, and if so taking them into physical custody by placing them on a 72-hour psychological hold (per 5150 W&I in California), and then transporting them to a county mental health facility for evaluation. Officers were not equipped with the depth of training, knowledge, and skillsets to understand various mental illnesses, and how to deescalate these situations when the person was acting out in a violent manner or was suffering from a psychotic episode. Nor were officers equipped with skills to help them communicate effectively and buy time to achieve an outcome where the person was able to be taken into custody without physical force being used. Sadly, the lack of training and understanding by law enforcement produced tragic outcomes that resulted in physical and even deadly force being used in situations where it could have been avoided. Fortunately, great strides have been made in this area with California police agencies taking a lead in recognizing that more training and resources had to be provided. All Sebastopol Police officers attend Crisis Intervention Training at the earliest opportunity, and nearly every officer has attended currently.

It has been recognized that not all persons who are in crisis are violent, dangerous, or in need of being taken into physical custody, or placed on an involuntary hold to get them the help and resources they need. Many current models in use do not have the police respond, except in situations where the individual could be presenting a danger to others, especially to the responding specialists. These models have developed teams of persons trained in crisis intervention, counseling or clinical evaluation with additional knowledge regarding alcohol and drug abuse, and teams also include persons with some form of EMT or paramedic training.

Models such as a SAFE team leverage existing behavioral health programs and ensure a seamless referral to an established continuum of care. SAFE team models are currently in place in various cities in Sonoma County and are managed by Petaluma People Services under contracts with those cities. Petaluma and San Rafael each have their own contract with the organization, while Rohnert Park, Cotati, and Sonoma State University share costs in a combined contract. For perspective, Cotati, who is very similar to us, funds \$150,000 per year for their share of costs between the three agencies. Their SAFE team model provides homeless outreach services as well as transportation to services for unhoused, crisis intervention services for those experiencing mental health episodes, and they can be dispatched to situations without police assistance, or in conjunction with police

response if the circumstances dictate based upon their operating procedures and their assessment of the situation at the time they are notified.

In 2023, the Petaluma's Chief of Police estimated that the SAFE program lowered the amount of calls police needed to respond to by 5% of their total annual call volume; that individuals who would have been booked into the county jail were diverted through the use of the team; and trips by ambulance to an emergency room were able to be diverted through the use of the team, who is able to render some basic first aid and bandaging services with the EMT on board. The teams also provide transports of individuals to various service providers including hospitals, the Redwood Gospel Mission, hotels, and transportation hubs. SAFE team models allow officers time to address more traditional policing activities, such as foot patrols, traffic enforcement, patrolling in neighborhoods and business areas which translates to crime prevention, and community policing activities.

Many of the municipalities in Sonoma County that fund programs in their own jurisdictions have received a share of County Measure O funds to offset costs and fund their programs. However, Measure O funds that could be directed towards these programs may be one-time or temporary in nature as part of a broader plan aimed at transitioning existing programs to a different funding model by means of reimbursement through Medi-Cal. Monitoring on-going and temporary funding sources as they are related to the County's plans will be part of this exploration and evaluation process.

How Does It Work? Incidents involving mental health, addiction, and homelessness account for a significant number of police calls, proactive efforts and time commitment to the Sebastopol police department annually. Our records management system was recently modified to more accurately track the number of homeless related incidents officers are spending time on, but at this point accurate numbers are not yet available but will be in the future. Officers have estimated that at least one third to half of their field time is spent on homeless related issues. Since January 2023, SPD officers responded to 64 incidents regarding people who likely needed to be placed on a 72-hour hold (5150 W&I). Based upon the 2024 countywide Point in Time count of homeless in Sonoma County, Sebastopol has the highest per capita number of unsheltered homeless of any city in Sonoma County. If the City had a SAFE type of program, many of these calls and functions could be responded to by a team with the tools, resources, and knowledge to address the unique needs of community members more effectively, thus freeing up officer's time for more traditional law enforcement functions.

Currently, the Sebastopol Police Department relies on the Sonoma County Mobile Support Team (MST) to provide services when we have mental health related calls. The MST is meeting our current standards regarding response times and availability as required by the State of California, though there have been instances where they have had to delay their response due to the fact they were tied up on another call in the county. In those cases, the situation was stabilized and officers had to stand by and wait for MST to arrive. But the delay did not negatively affect the outcome of the call. The difference with MST is that they do not provide any responses except to calls directly relating to mental health issues. They do not provide any services related to homelessness unless the person is in a mental health crisis, and they do not provide any proactive outreach or non-emergency type of response. MST generally have only one team on duty most of the time during the week which could potentially limit their ability to respond in an emergency situation, which will then require law enforcement to respond and deal with the situation with the limited amount of training and expertise they possess.

The SAFE team provides 3 main services to the community:

- Emergency response for issues relating to mental health, addiction, and homelessness
- Non-emergency response for people in need

- Proactive community outreach to homeless individuals

SAFE team members are accompanied by police officers to calls for service only if a person is armed, believed to be in danger of causing harm to themselves or others, or if emergency medical care is needed. The SAFE team does not provide emergency medical care or perform involuntary mental health detention.

The team works proactively to address low level issues and provides preventative outreach to help ensure individuals don't end up needing a higher level of care. This program is intended to benefit all public safety by keeping police officers, firefighters, and paramedics available for appropriate emergencies, and to lessen the impacts on our Emergency Medical System. SAFE team staff are EMT trained and can provide basic first aid in the field. In many instances, this is the only care needed. It eliminates many instances where currently the fire department engine and possibly a paramedic ambulance would be dispatched to respond based on existing protocols. Oftentimes, without a SAFE team type of model in place, the paramedic ambulance is required to transport the person to a hospital Emergency Room impacting ambulance coverage and emergency room capacity. The SAFE team can transport the person to a hospital or to an urgent care facility for non-emergency treatment thus keeping the other resources available for more critical responses.

The types of teams generally do not provide mental health services to the staff of the police departments they work with. There are some confidentiality and legal issues regarding police employees that create some difficulties. The fact that officers are not responding to as many calls dealing with mentally ill persons where they have a limited amount of training and expertise, helps increase officers' well-being, lowers their stress levels, and increases job satisfaction by being able to fill the roles they got into the profession to perform. It could be explored to utilize SAFE team members as a component of the training program for our staff.

SAFE team and similar programs do have a substantial fiscal impact on cities that fund them. It is estimated that startup costs for the purchase and outfitting of a van, required equipment and supplies are approximately \$150,000. The staff costs are approximately \$125 per hour to appropriately staff the van. Many of the cities have been able to offset the costs through equitable sharing of Measure O funds by the county and by sharing the overall cost of a team between several entities (Rohnert Park, Cotati, Sonoma State University). Chief Nelson has communicated with the Sheriff who has expressed an interest in possibly sharing costs to fund a team to serve the West County area including Sebastopol. For the City of Sebastopol, I do not believe our needs and our fiscal situation justify funding a full-time team to solely serve Sebastopol. A shared resource model would meet our needs well and is more fiscally responsible and feasible.

STAFF ANALYSIS:

The Sonoma County Sheriff has expressed an interest to explore the formation of a West County Homeless and Mental Health Services team that replicates a Mobile Support Team (MST), or a Specialized Assistance For Everyone (SAFE) team model, or a similar model to exclusively serve the West County area. This could potentially include the City of Sebastopol. These types of models are proven methods of providing alternative policing, while serving a vulnerable population.

Having access to a SAFE model team would be a benefit to some of the most vulnerable people in our community. It would provide a team of people with specialized training and abilities to respond to mental health related incidents, provide outreach and wraparound support services to our homeless and mentally ill, free up police time to focus on more traditional law enforcement responsibilities, and eliminate a police response to calls in certain instances.

The role of the City of Sebastopol would be to monitor progress on the formation of a West County team and engage more deeply when and if there are opportunities to do so. Much of the initial monitoring, exploration, and conversations would be conducted by the Police Chief when those opportunities present themselves. The role of the City Council liaison would be to be present and participative when applicable, particularly in any meetings involving other elected officials. The liaison would be involved in the monitoring and support for the exploration of any proposed program at the elected official level and championing an agreed upon model for the formation of such a program. The liaison would also be able to report to the full council on any developments at a broader or County level and would keep the Police Chief apprised of those developments. Likewise, the Police Chief would keep the Council Liaison fully informed regarding any developments and information the Chief learns from meetings or other venues the Chief participates in during this process, and the two would work collaboratively throughout this endeavor.

Identifying potential funding sources, quantifying how many hours per week the resource is needed, conversing with stakeholders, and discussing potential partnership agreements are initial steps that should be taken to decide if the City of Sebastopol can and should move towards the formation of a team to serve the City of Sebastopol. The appointment of a City Council liaison to work in conjunction and collaboratively with the Chief of Police would assist in information gathering to make that determination. Appointing a liaison and exploring the possibility of having this resource for our community has no additional impact on our general fund and is a logical first step in evaluating feasibility.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

This item has been noticed in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and was available for public viewing and review at least 72 hours prior to the scheduled meeting date.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact with approval of this agenda item.

OPTIONS:

Recommendation Restated –

Approve the appointment of a City Council Liaison and direct the Police Chief to continue monitoring and exploring opportunities for the formation of a West County Homeless and Mental Health support and assistance program similar to a West County Mobile Support Team or a West County SAFE type of team.

1. That the City Council not approve the appointment of a City Council Liaison and not request the Police Chief to continue exploring a West County Homeless and Mental Health Support Team or a similar program in conjunction with the liaison.
2. That the City Council not approve the appointment of a City Council Liaison, but direct the Police Chief to continue exploring the formation of a West County Homeless and Mental Health Support Team or a similar program.

ATTACHMENTS:

None

APPROVALS:

Department Head Approval: RN Approval Date: 09/25/24

CEQA Determination (Planning): N/A Approval Date: N/A

The proposed action is not a project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

Administrative Services (Financial) N/A Approval Date: N/A

Costs authorized in City Approved Budget: Yes No N/A

Account Code (if applicable) _____

City Attorney Approval: N/A Approval Date: N/A

City Manager Approval: DS Approval Date: 09/25/24