

Mental health



Matthew Jonas / Staff Photographer

Paramedic Kyle Hoover talks with Christian, no last name given, near Longs Peak Hospital in Longmont on Aug. 12. Christian had been evicted and made homeless as a result.

‘An invaluable resource’

Law enforcement agencies share benefits of co-response programs

By Annie Mehl
Staff Writer

On the days when Spencer Siverling’s feelings of self-doubt swell and become too much, she sits at home with a workbook and jots down her feelings.

Other times, when she needs to relax and calm her anxiety, she meditates using an app that guides her through ways to slow her breathing and clear her mind.

These are both methods Siverling, 23, has learned from Longmont mental health professionals who have taught her how to cope with her depression.

But that’s not the only positive skill they’ve helped her learn. Through their support, they’ve

shown her she’s not alone.

Longmont Public Safety’s CORE team is one of many co-response teams that is made up of mental health professionals who work with local law enforcement agencies to address behavioral health-related calls.

“I don’t know what I would do if we didn’t have them,” she said. “I probably wouldn’t be here today. They have come when I have been at my worst or even if I am just having an off day and someone is worried about me.”

Siverling has had frequent visits from clinicians with Longmont’s Crisis Outreach Response and Engagement. Some days, her friends call the CORE team when they worry about her. Siverling

has also called them herself.

During one visit from the CORE team, a clinician brought Siverling a workbook she now uses to write down her thoughts. Another time, a clinician sat with Siverling and helped her practice meditation.

“I used to hate breathing, but that’s been a really big thing,” she said. “One of the ladies sat with me for like an hour and we did a guided meditation to help with my panic attack and my suicidal thoughts I was having. It helped a lot.”

When it’s late at night and Siverling calls for resources, she is assisted by officers from the Longmont Police Department rather than the CORE team. Although the police are helpful, it’s not the

same, she said.

“CORE is more like a friend coming over and talking to you versus an authority figure,” she said. “They don’t have a full uniform. You aren’t as intimidated to tell them what you are going through. It feels like I have someone that cares about me,” Siverling said. “I love what they do. I am so grateful that we have them.”

A growing need

In 2018, the Longmont Public Safety Department began its CORE program to help address the area’s growing need for mental health resources.

The CORE program is made up of “teams,” which include a police officer, clinician and paramedic,

Longmont Public Safety Sgt. Andy Feaster said.

“We’re able to respond to a call See **CO-RESPONDER, 4A**

Weather

 **High: 87 | Low: 59**
Plenty of sunshine

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CO-RESPONDER from Page 1A

for patrol requests," he said. "We can get there and start engaging with the folks, and then as long as everything's fine, we put patrol back in service."

The CORE program includes two teams, but the goal is to have one new officer hired in October to complete the third team, Feaster said.

The program also has aided officers who learn from watching clinicians with the CORE team when they respond to calls.

"What's nice about these programs is that police in general are really starting to recognize the mental health component of calls," he said.

In 2020, the CORE team responded to 5,029 calls including 2,841 crisis response calls. Those numbers represent a 21.53% increase in all responses as compared to 2019, and a 118.5% increase in crisis response calls as compared to 2019.

Feaster said prior to having a mental health response team, he was once the officer responding to behavioral-health related calls. But those calls were not in his area of expertise. He did not have the skills, training and experience required to assist people needing help for mental health issues.

"For me, it's about bringing in expert resources to people in their exact moment of crisis," he said. "They have the ability to make long-term connections with the community."

Creating a connection

When Maeve Widmann heads to work at the Longmont Public Safety Department, she does not change into a uniform to match the officer or paramedic she works with. Instead, she stays in casual, everyday clothes, like those most residents wear.

"We originally had been in bulletproof vests, and it seemed to kind of turn people off," said Widmann, a clinician with the CORE team. "A lot of our conversations were convincing people we weren't police."

During one of her calls, Widmann met with a man who had been fighting with his girlfriend and was struggling with anxiety and depression.

The man told Widmann he had been having thoughts of suicide. He said when he had the thoughts,

his whole body would freeze.

Widmann helped the man find a way to jumpstart his system to pull him from his anxieties and depression. Their plan: Take shots of lemon juice.

"He put lemon juice by his bed, then we ended up leaving with a plan for him to try this stuff," she said. "He ended up writing me a letter a couple (of) months later saying that he tried it, and it was supersuccessful. He was able to have really good conversations with his therapist that were working out, and he and his girlfriend were in a much better place."

Widmann said if she hadn't been on scene, a patrol officer would not have told the man to drink lemon juice. But sometimes it's ideas like those that work, she said.

"That was definitely one of the feel-good ones that was like, 'This is a success' that you wouldn't typically see with just patrol officers," Widmann said.

Meeting the demands

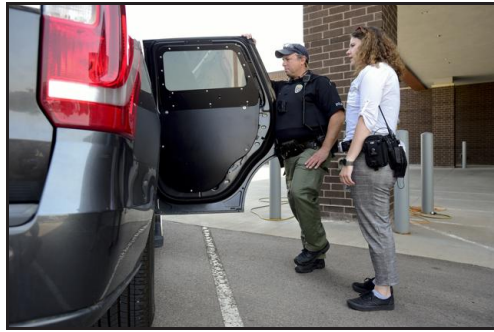
After Boulder County and Boulder's co-response program, known as Early Diversion Get Engaged, ended, the city started its own in-house program, leaving the eastern portion of the county without a team.

Last year, Jennine Hall, program manager for the Boulder County's Sheriff's Office Co-Responder Team, started collaborating with Erie and Lafayette to create their own team.

"We ended up getting some amazing people on our team since we have been going," Hall said. "We cover all unincorporated Boulder County. We cover everything with the exception of Longmont and Louisville."

Hall said the co-responder team has taken a different approach than in Boulder or Longmont. Rather than hiring licensed mental health clinicians, the team is made up of people who either have a master's or bachelor's degree in psychology or social work and five to eight years of experience in crisis management and de-escalation.

"Now I feel like we get the right people in the role, and we can train them," she said. "I have been consistently training and supervising staff for almost a year now. It took us a while to get



Matthew Jonas / Staff Photographer
CORE Clinician Maeve Widmann, right, and Longmont Police Officer Tash Petsas talk with Christian, no last name given, outside Longs Peak Hospital in Longmont on Aug. 12. Christian had been evicted, and the CORE team gave him food and water and a ride to a park.

there, but they are pretty good now. The training, I feel like, needs to be ongoing."

The county was awarded a five-year grant about three years ago to fund the program, Hall said. In order to keep the program going, she has been meeting with smaller towns like Nederland to expand the program and keep it alive after the grant funding runs out.

From December to August, Boulder County's co-response team has responded to 289 calls with law enforcement in the areas of unincorporated Boulder County, Erie, Lafayette, Nederland, Ward and Lyons. Most of these calls lasted from 30 minutes to one hour.

Mental health support accounted for 37% of co-responder calls, followed by parenting concerns at 22%, chronic addiction at 10% and geriatric mental health at 10%. Remaining calls fell into the categories of welfare checks or suicide concerns, domestic disturbances and homelessness.

"The officers we work with are amazing, but you can really tell that people are nervous about law enforcement," Hall said. "The partnership we have with (the officers) is amazing."

A joint effort

Area law enforcement agencies outside Boulder County also are piloting co-responder programs.

Weld County law enforcement agencies, including Frederick, Firestone, Dacono and Mead, have recently teamed up with North Range Behavioral

Health to form the Carbon Valley & Mead Co-Responder Program.

The program has existed in Greeley for several years, but thanks to grant funding, other towns and cities in Weld County are able to join, said Justin Glantz, patrol commander with the Frederick Police Department.

"Right now they are considering it a pilot program because it is grant funded, but they are continuing to grow," he said.

Glantz said the grant ends in June 2022, but Frederick and the three other law enforcement agencies have agreed to work together to continue the partnership.

According to a news release from Frederick, the town contributed \$6,500 from its 2022 budget to help support the program.

"Our officers in general feel more comfortable having (clinicians) there," he said. "We have a professional there in case we want to ask questions."

Recently, Glantz spoke with one of his officers who responded to a call about a woman having a behavioral health crisis. Not long after arriving to the scene, clinicians with North Range Behavioral Health were able to take over and let the officer return to patrol work.

"I think we are fortunate for our agency to be able to partner with North Range," he said. "Not only do we benefit, but the whole community is going to benefit from this."

Finding another avenue for support

When Boulder shifted directions from EDGE, its old co-response model, it moved to an internal pro-

gram.

Its new program is called the Crisis Intervention Response Team. It pairs a licensed clinician in Boulder's Housing and Human Services Department with a Boulder police officer for a joint response on behavioral health calls.

CIRT Clinical Supervisor Lucy Larbalestier said the team consists of herself, a supervisor and three clinicians.

Clinicians with CIRT are able to dispatch themselves to calls, or emergency dispatch will call and ask for a clinician to respond, Larbalestier said.

"Officers might arrive on scene, and it wasn't immediately apparent that it was a mental health issue. But they get there, and they are like, 'Oh, this person came in as a theft but this person' — for example — 'is having a manic episode, so can I get a clinician to come in?' she said. "We get assigned to calls in a variety of ways."

Wendy Schwartz, human services policy manager with Boulder's Housing and Human Services Department, said the CIRT team is just one answer to the behavioral health needs in the city and across the region.

"We don't want the crisis intervention to be the only place we put resources," she said.

Schwartz said the city and community needs to ask: What are the day-to-day mental health supports the community and the region can put in place so people can have that ongoing community care without just simply waiting until they are in a crisis and getting intervention from the CIRT team?

"Ideally we would want that to be managed through their primary provider or their specialty provider and not just wait until it gets so bad that they come back to the emergency room," she said.

'An invaluable resource'

Two years ago, the Louisville Police Department was awarded a \$125,000 grant from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs to start its first co-responder unit.

That money has since run out, said Jeff Fisher, Louisville deputy chief.

"We were fortunate that our city is going to continue

to fund the program just out of the general fund because it's been so valuable," he said.

Trish Munroe is the city's only clinician. She is a Community Reach Center employee, but is contracted to work with Louisville.

Munroe said her office is in the Louisville Police Department. She works four 10-hour shifts per week.

"Especially since we have gone through the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increased need," she said. "People are stressed. Sometimes they are not handling the stress very well and they need the officers to step in, and the officers will refer to me."

Munroe said she spends a lot of time working with families who may have a child who is struggling or she supports people who are grieving from the death of a loved one.

Fisher said there is one person who Munroe continuously checks in with to make sure she is doing all right if they haven't talked in a few days.

"It's not always a matter of being reactive to something that is going on," he said. "Certainly from my perspective, it has been beneficial to have Trish in regular contact with those in the community who really suffer from mental crises on a regular basis."

Calls for Louisville police response are increasing every day, said Sgt. Mike Miller. Thanks to Munroe, officers have more support when responding to mental health-related calls.

"As time goes on, our officers are going to be much more proficient at handling these, and it's only because Trish is out there helping them through this process," he said.

Eventually, the Louisville Police Department hopes to have more clinicians to assist Munroe. But that decision all comes down to securing funding, Fisher said.

"I think having (Munroe) as a resource elevates the level of service we are able to provide to the community, and with the ever-increasing call load — there's almost no call we go to that doesn't have a mental health component to it. It's just an invaluable resource."