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OC Sheriff partners with the OC Health Care Agency to refine crisis response program

SANTA ANA, Ca. The Orange County Sheriff's Department, in partnership with the OC Health Care Agency (HCA), is refining its crisis call diversion program to better serve those experiencing behavioral health disorders.

In March 2024, Sheriff's Department dispatchers began triaging non-violent and non-criminal behavioral health calls for service and diverting to OC Links as appropriate. The 24-hour, 7 days a week Behavioral Health Line is an entry point for the HCA's continuum of care providing information, referral, linkage, screening, linkage to homeless outreach resources, and dispatching of mobile crisis response teams. To date, approximately 240 calls have been diverted to OC Links, connecting those in crisis with appropriate behavioral health services and field outreach.

As the crisis call diversion program has developed, the need to expand the system has emerged. Under the expanded program, certain behavioral health related 9-1-1 calls will be diverted to a licensed clinician instead of dispatching deputies. With this expanded approach, any call determined to be behavioral health-related with no violation of law or threat to public safety will no longer receive a deputy response. This ensures that people in crisis receive immediate, compassionate and expert care from professionals and that deputies remain available for calls involving safety risks or criminal activity.

"Individuals in crisis who pose no threat to the community do not need law enforcement coming to their door. They need trained behavioral health clinicians who are better equipped to get them help," said **Don Barnes, Orange County Sheriff-Coroner**. "It's important for our community to keep deputies focused on public safety and available for emergency calls."

"Strengthening crisis response is essential to protecting both the community and individuals experiencing mental health challenges," stated **Chair Doug Chaffee, 4th District**. "This refined approach ensures that people receive the right care at the right time."

When the behavioral health crisis diversion program began, the HCA simultaneously promoted it's "First Responders for Mental Health Campaign" to promote OC Links as a dedicated resources for behavioral health emergencies including the crisis line, mobile crisis unit and warm line support. This campaign continues promoting essential information on recognizing behavioral health crises and accessing appropriate services.



ORANGE COUNTY
SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT



“Expanding clinician-led responses helps ensure residents experiencing a mental health crisis receive medical care and urgent treatment,” **said Vice Chair Katrina Foley, 5th District.** “This partnership connects residents with the professionals best equipped to support them, while allowing our deputies to focus on crime prevention and emergencies that require a law enforcement response.”

The Orange County Sheriff's Department receives about 10,000 calls for service each year involving mental health. OC Links remains a critical component in caring for the health, safety and well-being of those experiencing crisis. In calendar year 2025, the HCA received more than 43,789 calls and chats to their OC Links line and dispatched more than 10,862 mobile clinical responses.

“I’m proud that this enhanced diversion system will help and support many people in my district,” stated **Supervisor Janet Nguyen, 1st District.** “By uniting public safety and behavioral health expertise, the County is ensuring that individuals receive the care they need most.”

Calls either diverted by 911 operators or are made directly to OC Links, are answered 24/7/365 by OC Links Navigators who are licensed clinicians and trained behavioral health professionals. These specialists can assist individuals or a loved one at any stage of need – whether you’re seeking information, prevention resources, treatment options, direct referrals to behavioral health programs or urgent behavioral health support. OC Links navigators connect callers with appropriate resources or dispatch a mobile crisis response team when necessary.

“Police departments should not be the sole responders to mental health crisis calls, but too often officers can be placed in these situations and may not be equipped to safely resolve them alone,” said **Supervisor Vicente Sarmiento, 2nd District.** “I have consistently advocated for models that pair licensed mental health clinicians with law enforcement. Sadly, in recent months, we have seen multiple tragedies during responses to crisis calls and I believe this approach is an excellent solution to de-escalation, appropriate care, and potentially saving lives.”

The presence of uniforms or sirens can potentially heighten anxiety or fear, especially for those experiencing behavioral health issues. Having clinicians respond can reduce the chance of the situation escalating and Individuals are more likely to follow up with care and when their initial crisis encounter is supportive.

“This partnership between the Sheriff's Department and the OC Health Care Agency demonstrates how coordinated, cross agency collaboration leads to better outcomes for residents in crisis,” said **Supervisor Don Wagner, 3rd District.**



"A mental health condition is a medical issue, not a criminal one, and people deserve understanding and care when they are struggling," said **Dr. Veronica Kelley, HCA Director and Interim Behavioral Health Services Director**. "By recognizing the signs of crisis and connecting individuals to the right support, we can help ensure safety, dignity and healing for everyone involved."

In addition to OC Links, the Sheriff's Department continues to deploy its Behavioral Health Bureau teams in partnership with HCA's Psychiatric Emergency Response Teams (PERT), responsible for proactively contacting and supporting those experiencing behavioral health crises and homelessness in the community, and connecting individuals with resources including housing programs, counseling services, and other support services.

The public can access OC Links directly 24/7 by calling (855) 625-4657 or (855) OC Links.

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About the OC Health Care Agency

The OC Health Care Agency (HCA) is a regional interdisciplinary health jurisdiction and an accredited health department, charged with protecting and promoting individual, family and community health through partnership and coordination of public and private sector resources. Visit www.ochalthinfo.com to learn more about services and resources.