

# Washtenaw County will get a second Co-Response Unit in July

This July, with funding from Washtenaw County's Community Mental Health and Public Safety Preservation Millage, the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office and Washtenaw County Community Mental Health plan to launch a second Co-Response Unit (CRU) to serve the county.

Washtenaw County's first Co-Response Unit began as a pilot initiative in Ypsilanti Township in June of 2022.

The idea behind co-response is to make sure that 911 community crisis calls with a behavioral health aspect—intoxication, substance use, family disputes, homelessness, and mental health crises, for example—are met with the compassion and behavioral health expertise of a mental health professional and the risk and safety expertise of a law enforcement officer.

Co-response, a strategy that is being deployed in progressive communities across the nation, is known to better serve people in crisis while reducing unnecessary arrests and hospitalizations.

A number of studies have focused on the cost savings associated with co-response. Each diversion from jail to treatment saves taxpayer dollars; each diversion from hospitalization saves healthcare system dollars. And both of these—jail and hospitalization—can be very costly.

But co-response has many more benefits for the individuals and communities served.

Although Washtenaw County is working hard to address behavioral health needs in the jail—through a focus on screening, jail-based mental health and substance use treatment, and enhanced community reentry services—jails are not good places to address behavioral health needs.

Washtenaw County is one of 580 jurisdictions across the nation that have joined the national Stepping Up Initiative, which is working to reduce the overrepresentation of people with mental illness and substance use disorders in the criminal legal justice system. Research from the initiative shows that people with mental illness and substance use disorders are not only overrepresented in jail, but that they stay in jail longer and return to jail more often than their counterparts.

This is not because people with mental health and substance use concerns are more likely to commit crimes. It's because these concerns are difficult to treat and because law enforcement officers aren't as well equipped as mental health professionals to recognize the signs and symptoms. A well chosen co-response unit can address those concerns.

Washtenaw County's first Co-Response Unit, a two-year Ypsilanti Township pilot, was staffed by Mental Health Professional Christine Holston and Deputy James Roy. An independent evaluation by the University of Chicago Urban Labs found the program focused heavily on diversion, significantly reducing arrest and citation while building trust in the community through a broad range of services.

"At a macro level, CRU has been effective because of its unique ability to respond to—as Sheriff Clayton explains—the "risk" and "need" elements of an engagement," says Matthew Alemu, PhD, who is leading the evaluation for the University of Chicago.

"Part of Sheriff Clayton's motivation in creating CRU with CMH was his observation that most emergency calls usually involve some combination of these elements. With Deputy Roy and Christine in the same car, the risk and need elements of an engagement can now be addressed simultaneously using the resources of both WCSO and CMH. This was not possible prior to CRU. Furthermore, having WCSO and CMH in the same car reduces the time it takes for either organization to assist the other during an engagement."

Holston and Roy will now transfer to staffing the county-wide Co-Response Unit, while supporting a new team that has been hired to continue to serve Ypsilanti Township. The new co-response staff for Ypsilanti Township will be Deputy Richard Traskos and Mental Health Professional Emily Radar-Scheitz.

Traskos has worked with the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office since 2018, serving in a number of leadership roles including as a managing mental health instructor, verbal de-escalation instructor, and crisis intervention team member.

Scheitz has worked with Washtenaw County Community Mental Health since 2021 as a member of the agency's crisis response team.

"Co-Response programs are a win-win," says Police Services Captain Nancy Hansen. "They equip officers with mental health expertise while providing immediate care for individuals in crisis and reducing the burden on both law enforcement and the healthcare system."

Hansen particularly values the way Holston and Roy have built trust in the communities they serve and provide a more holistic approach to crisis intervention.