

NYPD to test mental-health first-response changes on S.I.

The NYPD plans to launch a pilot on Staten Island that will allow officers to respond to fewer 911 calls related to mental health crises, Police Commissioner James O'Neill said Wednesday during a panel in Manhattan on mental health and criminal justice.

"Internally at the NYPD we're trying to reduce the number of [mental-health-related] calls we have to respond to," O'Neill said. He added that police often feel they have no other option than to take someone to a hospital emergency department, even if that's not the best environment.

The NYPD has come under fire recently for using excessive force when responding to mental-health calls.

Initially, the Staten Island pilot program will direct the lowest-risk 911 callers experiencing emotional distress to the NYC Well hotline, said Joseph Conte, executive director of the Staten Island Performing Provider System, which is involved in developing the pilot. The hotline offers counseling and can direct people to treatment resources.

The program might evolve to include co-response teams for higher-risk callers, Conte said. Co-response teams, which are used in other cities, allow mental health professionals or social workers to accompany police as first responders to mental health crises.

"We need to think about safety first," Conte said. "If you do something and it blows up in the first week, what did you accomplish? Nothing." —C.L.