

Crisis prevention is primary focus of MCAT

By Ted Remsnyder
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Ted Remsnyder/Columbia-Greene Media Mobile Crisis Assessment Team Director Katie Oldakowski provided an update on the group's operations at the Greene County Legislature's Health Services Committee meeting on May 4.

CATSKILL — The Mobile Crisis Assessment Team is one of Greene County's top tools in the effort to combat the opioid crisis, and Director Katie Oldakowski provided an update on the group's operations at the Greene County Legislature's Health Services Committee meeting Wednesday.

The Health Association of Columbia-Greene Counties team was established in 2015 to provide crisis services to both counties with eight hours per day set aside for each.

The team, which includes 19 staff members, with five full-time employees, has served 3,162 individual Greene County residents since the start of the program in 2015.

Oldakowski told the legislature that the team has been dispatched 2,503 times in the county in the past seven years.

When grant funding for the program through the Greene and Columbia County HEALing Communities initiative expired at the end of 2021, the two counties agreed to step in and fund the crisis team.

Greene and Columbia counties split the funding of the team 50-50, with each county chipping in \$170,000 to fund the program annually.

“That’s why the two counties got together, because we were advised that they were going to lose their funding,” Greene County Administrator Shaun Groden said. “They may have gone dark. They may not have been able to continue this operation, so each county discussed the prospects and we both agreed that we would equally fund it, almost similar to what we do with the community college. We each contribute to the community college for the benefit of both counties.”

Oldakowski said the primary services the team provides include prevention, crisis intervention and hospital discharge follow-up.

“I think the big question is what does that funding get you?” Oldakowski said. “When you look at the total budget and you look at all of the services that we provide, MCAT focuses on prevention before someone is in a crisis and we want to link them to services and make sure that they have the resources that they need. Doctors, health insurance, whatever it is, we’re going to make sure that they get connected to where they need to go. Crisis intervention is our primary focus, whether someone is suicidal, homicidal or acting in a way that’s a danger to themselves or others. Substance use is also included in the crisis intervention benefit from the state, so that’s something that we have tackled since 2015.”

The team has received 97,448 phone calls from residents in distress since July 2015 and has a 93% diversion rate for unnecessary hospitalization and a 99% diversion rate from police intervention for the calls they respond to.

Greene County Mental Health Center Director Jason Fredenberg said the team provides a needed complement to his agency’s staff.

“When they started it was just a game-changer in terms of the types of resources that they could offer to the community,” Fredenberg told the Legislature. “It was just remarkable. My entire staff felt the difference when they came into town.”

Oldakowski told the Legislature the team has an average response time of 30 minutes to calls in each county.

“They’re mobile, so if a law enforcement person comes across someone who is overdosing or those types of things, they can react,” Groden said Friday. “There was an issue on the mountaintop and they got there in 30 minutes. With Mental Health it’s a scheduled appointment and it’s a whole different concept. So the ability to stabilize somebody and either prevent the overdose from reaching fatality or clogging up the emergency room, is the significance of it.”

In 2019, the team provided Greene County with \$636,938 in estimated cost savings by diverting police interventions, ambulance transportation and psychiatric emergency department visits.

Greene County Legislator Michael Bulich, R-Catskill, asked Oldakowski during Wednesday’s meeting if calls had doubled over 2018-19 levels due to the pandemic.

“With this pandemic that we went through, obviously mental health pressures increased on people when they were at home and isolated,” Bulich said.

“Yes and no,” Oldakowski replied. “Because of the shelter in place, it was actually a decline in services across the board initially. We were getting calls from people who were looking for services or just needed to talk through their anxiety or whatever their issues were. But there wasn’t anyone being seen in person and then it was kind of a holding pattern for a while. Then it exploded and we saw the mental health system cracking with staffing with the capabilities that we have. This wasn’t just in Greene and Columbia counties, this was counties across the state.”

Groden said the county could use some of the funding that Greene is set to receive from opioid manufacturer settlements to provide funding to the team.

“It kind of started out as a solution to a crisis, and now we’ll have to work with state reps to see if we can get them more permanent funding from the state,” Groden said. “There’s also the possibility we use some of our money from the lawsuit settlements. They have very specific requirements about how the opioid settlements can be expended. Maybe we can use some of that money in lieu of our own money.”