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Erie County to Take the Lead on Buffalo Police Mental Health Unit Program

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The Buffalo Police Department is in search of a new mental health services provider for its Behavioral Health Team, and this time, Erie County is footing the bill. The county's Department of Mental Health will soon begin reviewing responses to a request for proposals from potential providers under a new pilot program that will see the county spend up to \$500,000 for the one-year contract in support of the city police unit, which specializes in responding to calls that involve mental health crises. County officials say the program may be replicated with other departments in the future.

Sarah Bonk, commissioner of the Erie County Department of Mental Health, said, with the encouragement of County Executive Mark Poloncarz, that she made it a priority to find funding to get the program off the ground again, with the hope that if it is successful the city can find funding to continue supporting it and that the model can be replicated in other communities in the county.

"We want to use county tax dollars to be able to pilot for one year this resource that the community has identified as being so critical as really just one piece of the crisis part of our mental health system," Bonk said.

In an email, Buffalo police spokesperson Timothy Richards said the department decided not to renew its contract with Endeavor Health Services when it expired at the end of April and started discussion with the county on partnering on a new pilot.

“Over the course of the contract, the Buffalo Police Department's demands for services grew and the department decided it would seek other options that would lead to increased coverage from a more established and reliable partner,” Richards said.

Endeavor Health Services had worked with the unit from its [inception in 2020](#).

In its request for proposals, the county says it is looking for a service provider to offer support and follow-up services for the specialized unit, and to engage in joint responses when appropriate. However, the officers will remain the primary responders to all mental health related police calls.

Clinicians will offer support in crisis management, de-escalation and diversion from arrests when possible, while also following up with people to connect them to community-based support systems.

Operators will be required to have at least two licensed clinicians available to work with officers on calls from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday to Friday.

The department receives an average of 18 mental health related calls each day, according to the RFP. Clinicians will work on follow-up calls with people contacted by the unit when not out on calls.

The selected contractor will also be responsible for submitting documentation on all calls, track outcomes for diversion and follow-up care and connections to community support.

Police Commissioner Erika Shields declined to be interviewed for this article through Richards, so as to not influence the county's selection process, he told The News.

The program, which has been paid for by the city since it began in October of 2020, has worked to divert hundreds of mental health calls resulting in people being kept out of hospitals and jail.

The commissioner and Behavioral Health Team leadership support the conditions and parameters laid out in the request, Richards added.

Responses to the request for proposals are due Aug. 28 and Bonk said her department hopes to have the selected provider approved by the Erie County Legislature by the end of the year.

Bonk was part of the team that shaped the initial program for the Buffalo police while she was working for Endeavor Health Services. She said one of the places the initial model failed was moving past the basic community services links and assessments and moving toward a model that created a stronger treatment plan from the start.

“That's where the model didn't shape out the way I wanted it to in that initial design iteration,” Bonk said.

Bonk said that there was not enough coordination around the dispatching system, and that clinicians and law enforcement, at times, had a difficult time communicating, problems she said often led back to the department she now runs.

She sees this pilot as an opportunity to fix those issues, and to coordinate the system from a county level.

“That anger and frustration really, really drove me to be where I am,” she said.