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LOS ANGELES POLICE PROTECTIVE LEAGUE

A PROFESSIONAL POLICE UNION

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January 18, 2023

Honorable Members of the Los Angeles City Council
Los Angeles City Hall
200 North Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

RE: LAPD Mental Evaluation Unit; Facts vs. Myth/Misunderstanding

Dear Members of the City Council,

The pressure on you, as elected officials, to respond to officer-involved shootings and in-custody incidents, especially those where there is a loss of life, is immense and, at times, emotional. The release of the Critical Incident Videos of the officer-involved shootings of Takar Smith and Oscar Sanchez, as well as the In-Custody death of Keenan Anderson, have prompted some to abandon facts and instead perpetuate myths with regard to how the LAPD officers responded to these incidents and how the Mental Evaluation Unit (MEU) operates.

There appears to be a lack of understanding of the LAPD's Mental Evaluation Unit's (MEU) mission, policies, procedures and protocols. In addition, there appears to be a lack of knowledge as to how many MEU SMART units, which consist of one armed police officer and one Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH) clinician, are available citywide at any one time and how many calls for service the MEU receives in a given year.

It is our hope that the facts contained in this letter will assist you as we collectively navigate our mutual desire to address our mental health crisis in a meaningful and safe manner and improve outcomes.

Myth/Misunderstanding:

"I am deeply troubled that mental health experts were not called in..."¹, "...officers failed to request any of the three then-available LAPD teams intended to help de-escalate encounters with people experiencing mental health crisis."²

¹ Mayor Karen Bass Statement on the Deaths of Takar Smith, Keenan Anderson & Oscar Sanchez
<https://mayor.lacity.gov/news/mayor-karen-bass-statement-deaths-takar-smith-keen-an-anderson-oscar-sanchez>

² Kenneth Mejia January 12, 2023 Tweet
<https://twitter.com/lacontroller/status/1613701767870705664>

Fact:

LAPD's MEU SMART units are not first responders to any of the three recent incidents referenced in the first paragraph of this letter. SMART units are secondary responders, and in these incidents they would have engaged with the suspects after the scene was secure and stabilized. The SMART unit would then conduct a mental health evaluation of the detained individual to determine next steps. Again, this evaluation is conducted after the incident scene is secure and stabilized. In none of the three incidents referenced above would a SMART unit have taken a primary role. And in no circumstances would an unarmed clinician be inserted into an incident where there are weapons, volatility, and/or a crime in progress is being committed.

Per the January 14, 2021, Office of the Chief of Police Notice 8.2, [IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MENTAL EVALUATION UNIT'S SYSTEMWIDE MENTAL ASSESSMENT RESPONSE TEAM CO-RESPONSE MODEL](#)

Since a SMART unit is composed of a sworn officer and a Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH) clinician, patrol will remain the primary unit with the SMART unit serving as a supporting element.³

The SMART unit shall not go Code-6 before the patrol unit arrives on scene. If a SMART unit arrives to the call prior to the patrol unit. The SMART officer shall broadcast they are "Code-6 in the area" to inform patrol the SMART unit is waiting for their arrival.⁴

PROCEDURES AT SCENE

Patrol officers will be the primary contact and cover officers for each call, with the SMART unit providing support. If both units arrive together, the patrol officers may allow the SMART officer to assume the contact role to de-escalate a situation.

Note: When the SMART unit arrives on scene, the DMH clinician will stay back with the police vehicle or another tactically secure location as directed by the SMART officer. After the situation is stabilized, the SMART officer will introduce the DMH clinician into the call, and the SMART unit will handle the mental health evaluation.

Once the scene is stabilized, the patrol and SMART units will assess the call together and determine the best course of action.⁵

³ Pg. 1 Chief of Police Notice 8.2, January 14, 2021

⁴ Pg. 2 Chief of Police Notice 8.2, January 14, 2021

⁵ Pg. 2 Chief of Police Notice 8.2, January 14, 2021

Myth/Misunderstanding:

“We do not respond to mental health calls with mental health care, we respond with guns and badges and blaring lights and shouting and commands that people may or may not be in a position to adhere to. Just this year we have already lost three people, I will not be convinced by anybody that any of those people deserved to have their life taken, least of all Keenan Anderson.”⁶

Fact:

Not one of the incidents referenced by Councilmember Harris Dawson was a “mental health” call for service. In fact, one incident involved a female victim in possession of a restraining order preventing her male abuser from being near her or her home. The victim reported that the male was, in fact, in her home, would not leave and that he had access to a large knife.

In another incident, calls were received reporting a male in possession of a long stick with a sharp object taped to the end who was throwing stones at passing cars.

In another incident, an individual, whose preliminary toxicology results indicate he was on cocaine, was involved in a car accident, fled the scene (felony hit and run), while fleeing he attempted to open the car door of an innocent bystander, and ended up running through traffic.

These were not mental health calls but rather violations of the law that were addressed. A restraining order was being served in a closed area where a knife was within reach, throwing rocks at moving vehicles by an individual with a long stick with a sharp object at the tip, and an individual fleeing a car accident.

In none of these incidents would a SMART unit be the first responder, and in the two incidents where a weapon was involved, the SMART unit clinician would not engage unless and until the scene was secure and stabilized. Only then would an assessment be made of the detained suspects’ mental health status.

We encourage you to review the LAPD Mental Evaluation Unit Program Overview, [FIELD PROTOCOLS FOR CALL MANAGEMENT AND DIVERSION](#) document. This overview will provide factual information about how our officers manage mental health calls.

⁶ Councilmember Marqueece Harris Dawson, January 17, 2023 Tweet/Video
<https://twitter.com/mhdcd8/status/1615438054394834946>

In the aftermath of the Keenan Anderson tragedy, Councilmember Harris Dawson has proposed eliminating the LAPD from enforcing traffic laws, including running a red light. This is a policy decision that he can put forward to the entire city council to enact or reject. Apparently, he is conflating the enforcement of traffic laws with police responding to a traffic accident where a suspect was fleeing the accident.

Last year there were 309 traffic fatalities in Los Angeles, a 5% increase over 2021 and a 28% increase over 2020. Pedestrians — mainly those 29 years or younger and seniors 50 and older — and cyclists are the people most impacted by traffic fatalities in L.A. In 2022, pedestrians and cyclists saw a combined total of 178 traffic-related fatalities.⁷

If Councilmember Dawson wishes to legalize fleeing a car crash and eliminating the police from enforcing traffic laws, including speeding, suspected DUI, running red lights and disregarding stop signs, then he ought to put it in a motion and bring it to his colleagues for a vote.

Fact:

At any given time in Los Angeles, on average, there are 4-8 SMART units available for the entire city. In 2020, the number of SMART calls for service was 19,226, and the number of calls handled by SMART was 6,712. Clearly, there is a need to increase the number of these units to manage the existing call volume.

Fact:

The officers involved in the three recent incidents engaged in de-escalation tactics that embodied the best practices of attempting to build rapport, calmly engaging the suspects to attempt to secure compliance and reduce the likelihood of any use of force; they used the name of the suspect when they could and spent time trying to calm the suspects as they continually assessed the evolving situations.

The suspects escalated each of these incidents, not the responding officers.

⁷ <https://ktla.com/news/local-news/traffic-fatalities-in-los-angeles-continue-to-increase-according-to-new-study/>

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The League has proposed at the local, state, and national levels a comprehensive evaluation of what calls for service police officers respond to and what calls we do not respond to. We have requested additional ongoing simulation training to ensure perishable skills are not diminished and that national best practices are continuously driven into our culture when it comes to actual mental health calls. We are eager to engage on serious proposals that are rooted in keeping the public, mental health clinicians, and police officers safe.

Very truly yours,
BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Los Angeles Police Protective League
CRAIG D. LALLY
President

Cc: Mayor Karen Bass
Chris Thompson, Chief of Staff, Mayor Karen Bass