

Program Title: Support Team Assisted Response (STAR)

Organization: Mental Health Center of Denver

Program Abstract (50 words max, please):

Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) is an alternative response for low-risk 911 calls. An unmarked mobile unit staffed by a clinician and paramedic respond to behavioral health calls and connect people to care. In year one, STAR handled 1,400 calls with no arrests, injuries or need for police back up.

Program Description (Include program development, program information, staffing requirements, pertinent data and start-up costs.): **Please limit to 2 pages, and remember to address all criteria specified.*

Introduction: In June 2020, an unmarked mobile unit piloted by a paramedic and mental health clinician eased out of the Denver Health Paramedics garage, officially launching a pilot program called Support Team Assisted Response (STAR). The program was created to offer a more appropriate first response to the steady stream of 911 calls concerning people in behavioral health and substance use crises. Denver's 911 system, like emergency response systems across the country, was being deluged with calls and many did not have a criminal element. Police and first responders often didn't have the tools to help someone in a mental health crisis and there weren't a lot of options for help.

Program Development: Recognizing this mounting problem, the City of Denver created a task force to imagine possible solutions. Organizations such as the Mental Health Center of Denver, Denver Health, Denver Police Department, Denver Department of Public Health and Environment as well as community stakeholders like Servicios de la Raza, Harm Reduction Action Center, Denver Justice Project, DASHR, and Caring4Denver were all part of the committee that helped create STAR. Many of the committee members traveled to Eugene, Oregon to learn firsthand about a program called CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) that pairs trained community volunteers with an EMT to respond to certain 911 calls. The group liked what they saw in Eugene and used it as a starting point to create STAR, which was developed to address the challenges of a larger, urban city and ensure an appropriate response. The Denver Police Department and the Mental Health Center of Denver already had a very successful partnership established through its Co-Responder program that pairs clinicians with police officers. Building on the success of the Co-Responder program and with elements taken from CAHOOTS, STAR was created with pilot funding provided by the Caring for Denver Foundation.

Staffing Requirements: STAR is staffed by a paramedic from Denver Health Paramedics and a Mental Health Center of Denver clinician. A small team of Denver Health Paramedics and Mental Health Center of Denver Co-Responders received additional training to be designated part of the STAR team. The van operates five days a week from 10 am – 6 pm mostly in the city's downtown core. STAR relies on Denver's 911 dispatch, partnership with the Denver Police Department and other first responders.

Start Up Costs: Start up budget was approximately \$200,000.

Results & Data: The primary question for the STAR pilot was: *Could STAR could help curtail the steady stream of people in behavioral health crises sent to overcrowded jails and emergency*

departments and help handle the overwhelming number of 911 calls that don't require a police response?

The answer after one year patrolling the streets of Denver - a resounding yes. **STAR is producing paradigm shift results.** In its first year, STAR responded to 1,400 calls, without a single call ever requiring police backup, no injuries and not a single arrest made. All calls were handled on scene by the STAR unit. Other key findings include:

- 46% of calls involved a transport to a support option in the community such as a shelter, organization, Walk-in Center, detox, etc.
- 30% of calls were police clearing the initial call and requesting support to relieve them and bring in STAR for a more appropriate response.
- 28% of contacts involved someone newly accessing Mental Health Center of Denver services or being reconnected to care.
- Average call time was 29 minutes which is 7 minutes faster than a typical police response on the same type of call.

More than 100 cities across the U.S. have contacted STAR to learn more with the intention to launch a similar program. The administrator of the STAR program was invited to speak to the US Congress about the program and STAR has been covered by national and international media including The Today Show, CNN, National Public Radio, NBC Nightly News and countless others.

This recent example of how STAR helped a Denver woman experiencing a behavioral health crisis is typical of how the program operates and demonstrates the need for growth of these programs and how through coordination, collaboration and trust, we can better meet and support the community's needs:

STAR was requested by Denver Police to a convenience store where a woman was experiencing mental health symptoms and actively refusing to leave the establishment. The store asked that she be classified as a trespasser, but the Denver Police recognized that this was a mental health situation and not criminal in nature. STAR was requested on scene and was quickly able to build rapport with the woman. After a short time, she agreed to leave and asked to be transported to a local women's day shelter that frequently partners with STAR. During the transport, the woman asked for assistance activating her benefit card. The STAR team provided brief case management and activated the card so she could purchase food and other basic need items, which turned out to be the root cause of her issues with the convenience store interaction. The woman was connected to the day shelter where she could rest, shower and do her laundry. Mental health services were set up and housing support established prior to her leaving the shelter.

Through innovative thinking, Denver has taken the next step in supporting the community, creating a program that we hope to see replicated in cities across the U.S. to better ensure that people in a behavioral health crisis get the appropriate help and are connected to care. We are also thrilled that STAR will grow significantly from one pilot van staffed by a team of two to six vans and a team of 12 that will operate throughout most of Denver.