

Tackling the Mental Health Epidemic One Paw at a Time

The Pima County Sheriff's Department's Mental Health Support Team (MHST), a first-of-its-kind investigative unit, was launched in late May 2013. The mission of the MHST Unit is to insure individuals with mental health challenges are receiving necessary treatment and support through a collaborative effort with behavioral health professionals, law enforcement, medical practitioners and the public. This is accomplished by a simultaneous and parallel investigative approach in which there is an appropriate resolution in the criminal justice and behavioral health systems. Additionally, individuals exhibiting behavioral patterns of concern are identified to receive appropriate treatment to ensure everyone's safety.

While traditional crisis response methods can be efficient, they are not always effective. Always looking to be a leader in innovation and to continue to be on the forefront of progressive strategies, the Pima County Sheriff's Department created the Therapy Canine Program which encompasses the Crisis Canine Response Team

(CCRT), the Corrections Pet Assisted Stress Therapy (CPAST) Canine Program, and the School Resource Officer Canine Team (SROCT).

Arizona Complete Health, a local health care provider, funded the program with a gift to the Pima County Sheriff's Department. The two organizations cultivated their partnership to develop a mutually beneficial relationships built on a foundation of trust. While there is no formal contract between the two organizations, their trust established a willingness to collaborate and set new standards.

"Collaboration between law enforcement and behavioral health providers is fundamental to addressing the challenges associated with serving those in our community suffering mental illness. We know that a significant portion of these persons will at some point interact with law enforcement and possibly become incarcerated. Working together we can in fact make a positive difference," states Sheriff Mark D. Napier.

The first part of the program to come to fruition was the CCRT program. Under the guidance of Detective Shawn Degan and his partner "Deputy Leo," the program aims to reduce the stigma associated with Mental Health both inside and outside the department. A primary responsibility is responding to public crisis response calls and improving the health of the community. The CCRT is utilized in a wide range of crisis and mental health situations



which vary from one-on-one to community wide interactions. In addition to doing crisis response they also work with community hospitals, do mental health welfare checks, and departmental crisis response therapy. The CCRT has also been extremely beneficial to first responder needs.

Secondarily, and unexpectedly, is the impact Deputy Leo has within the department. Often times overlooked and unforgotten are the individuals who actually are responding to calls. It is easy to see the nexus and interaction between first responders and the public, but who takes care of those who take care of us? Within the law enforcement community, if not more so than the civilian public, STIGMA is real. No one wants to be the cop who admits he needs help. No one wants to admit the one who is supposed to be strong, is actually weak and needs help. Deputy



Leo offers a unique therapeutic intervention that is stigma free, judgment free, and always keeps a secret. Introduced in 2017, Deputy Leo has responded to all these calls and more, providing unconditional love, support, and quiet therapy to those whom we depend on to be strong, when we cannot be. It is well known that, we cannot take care of others unless we take care of ourselves.

The CFAST Unit is utilized internally in our Adult Detention Complex for both employee and prisoner welfare. The team was established after Detective Degan and Deputy Leo spent time training at the Adult Detention Complex and positive indicators were identified. The correlation to the CCRT and training at the Adult Detention Complex led to the development of CFAST. The proactive approach to inmate contact through rounds in the housing unit and assisting inmates in times of crisis has proven to reduce stress among inmate populations which leads to reduction of suicides, violence, and assaults. When these reductions occur it provides a cohesive balance for the corrections officers, thus a less stressful work day. The benefit of employee wellness and enrichment has improved with the addition of the CFAST program. To date, the Pima County Adult Detention Complex is the only facility that has two registered therapy canines, Officer Luke and Officer Leia.

Since its implementation the Therapy Canine Program has produced unprecedented positive outcomes that have led to discussions of growth and outreach. The close working partnership with community behavioral



health organizations was the catalyst for the development of the School Resource Officer Therapy Canine Program. The purpose of these canines is for both canine-assisted interventions and activates.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 1 in 5 American children ages 3 through 17- about 15 million- have a diagnosable mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder in a given year. Only 20 percent of the children diagnosed ever receive treatment – about 12 million youth aren't receiving treatment.

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders have the worst graduation rate of all students with disabilities. Nationally, only 40 percent of students with emotional, behavioral, and mental health disorders graduate from high school, compared to the national average of 76 percent; and over 50% of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities ages 14 and older drop out of high school. This is the highest dropout rate of any disability group. Dropouts also make up disproportionately higher percentages of the nation's institutionalized population. Community Bridges, Arizona's largest system of education and treatment services for integrated behavioral health programs, reported last year that 40 percent of their response to crisis calls generated from students ranging in age from 7-17 years old.

Canine Interventions aims to improve students social, cognitive, and emotional functioning. Law enforcement officers who utilize therapy canines can be viewed as less threatening, potentially increasing the connection between student and officer. Canine Interventions can include one-on-one or small group interactions which allow students to learn coping mechanisms that can help with anxiety and mental health concerns. Canine-Assisted Activities, an umbrella term that covers different ways the canines interact with students, have positive outcomes, but don't target a specific student. They are conducted in a larger group setting and utilized as a behavior and academic incentive.

Our therapy canine program is more comfortable for people, providing support and love without judgement. Studies show the positive influence dogs can have on people and their ability to sense emotions. This avenue for release and therapy has been extremely successful and requested frequently now that they are in use.

