

HCSO Mental Health Crisis Intervention Teams Reach Public Safety Landmark

The Crisis Intervention Response Teams created by Harris County Sheriff Adrian Garcia in cooperation with other government agencies have now diverted more than 1,000 people to emergency mental health treatment rather than place them in county jail cells where they would face relatively minor charges.



“This is the safer, smarter, less expensive approach to dealing with the many cases every day in which deputies and other law enforcement officers encounter people in mental health crisis,” Garcia said. “It doesn’t just help sick people get better sooner; it also helps prevent tragedies, crimes, and heavier burdens on taxpayers.”

In the Houston area, mental health crisis response teams in law enforcement were pioneered by the Houston Police Department, which has 10 two-person teams that respond to 911 calls potentially involving a person with mental illness. Each team is an officer with special training and a civilian clinician from the Mental Health Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County.

The service did not exist for the 1.7 million people in the county’s unincorporated areas until Sheriff Garcia convinced Commissioners Court during an employee hiring freeze in 2011 to fund positions for three county teams. The Sheriff’s Office now has 11 teams and will launch the 12th this month.

Since its October 2011 start, HCSO CIRT has responded to 7,861 calls for service. In 2,798, a subject was taken for treatment under an emergency detention order to the MHMRA NeuroPsychiatric Center, Harris Health’s Ben Taub Hospital, a Veterans Administration facility or private care facility such as a Memorial Hermann Mental Health Crisis Clinic.

In 1,020 of the instances involving emergency care, the subjects would have been charged and jailed for violations such as trespassing or criminal mischief if CIRT had not existed. These diversions to care have saved taxpayers at least \$1.1 million in jail costs and perhaps many more millions of dollars depending on how long each person would have had to stay behind bars. The sheriff’s staff has worked closely with all entities listed above to expand and improve the program.

“Look at the results,” Sheriff Garcia said. “Obviously this service was desperately needed for all of Harris County. While we try to serve the community in every way possible, especially when there’s an emergency, people with mental illness are just that – ill people. Whenever possible, illness should be dealt with by medical professionals first, not correctional facilities.”

When CIRT responses do not lead to emergency treatment or arrest, cases are often resolved by placing subjects in the care of families and their physicians.

The sheriff emphasized that during an emergency mental health crisis, witnesses or the person with the illness should call 911 for a law enforcement response only when the crisis might involve the commission of a crime. In emergency cases that do not involve a crime, options include calling MHMRA toll-free at [866-970-4770](tel:866-970-4770) or the Crisis Intervention of Houston at 713-HOTLINE (468-5463). The Mental Health Association of Greater Houston offers a non-emergency referral service at [713-523-8963](tel:713-523-8963).

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