

## HEALTHCARE

# New program hits the streets to aid Newport's unhoused – how it works

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A pilot program Newport Mental Health kickstarted earlier this year takes a “boots on the ground” approach to mental health and homelessness services.

Rhode Island Outreach is a new program out of Newport Mental Health that sends behavioral health response teams to people experiencing mental health crises. Essentially, when someone calls the program either at Newport Mental Health’s line – 401-846-1213 – or the newly created Behavioral Health Helpline – 988 – the program dispatches a behavioral specialist and a medical specialist to come to the person in crisis and help them with anything they might need, without resorting to calling the police or sending an ambulance.

“It’s really a crisis de-escalation program that looks to decrease the amount of hospitalizations that happen, decrease the amount of incarcerations that happen due to behavioral health crisis calls,” Program Director Partaja “PJ” Spann said.



The program is based in Newport County but also has an East Bay team to help with calls from East Providence, Bristol, Warren and Barrington. It's modeled after CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets), another crisis de-escalation program from Eugene, Oregon.

Newport Mental Health Dayna Gladstein said the crises RIO can help with can range from dealing with someone having a mental health episode, to helping a homeless person access services, to talking with someone who might be showing signs of dealing with depression.

The program helps those who are housed and unhoused, but many of those who have received RIO's "preventative outreach" services so far have been homeless. In between calls, the mobile outreach team will visit places such as meal sites, like soup kitchens, to interact with people who might be interested in receiving mental health support services, but also helping them meet their basic needs by supplying them with items such as first aid supplies, blankets, clothes and food.

“They’re proactively out there being available and being visible,” Spann said.

Spann said there are “no strings attached,” with the new program, meaning those who seek RIO’s services do not have to be Newport Mental Health clients and do not have to agree to undergo further treatment. They don’t even need the person’s name. The idea is to remove barriers to healthcare and get what that person needs at the moment.

“Our interpretation of meeting people where they’re at is ‘What do you need in this moment and what will you need tomorrow and the next day,’” Gladstein said.

If the person does decide they want further help, Newport Mental Health will be able to connect them to services.

Eventually, RIO will have vans decked out with their logo roaming around Newport’s streets. The interior of these vans will be souped up with first aid supplies and a place to lay down if the individual in need is being transported somewhere, however, the van is not a typical emergency medical services truck or ambulance.

“It’s just that opportunity to be in a comfortable, safe space,” Spann said. “A lot warmer than maybe the back of a typical EMT truck.”

RIO has been out in the field since February and during a recent week, spoke with 54 individuals, 31 of which were people the program had not interacted with before. They have been working with the Newport Police Department as well, taking on calls the police department feels could use behavioral health expertise first, rather than law enforcement.

The program’s inspiration, CAHOOTS in Oregon, has been out for over 30 years and studied for its effectiveness. The Eugene Police Department’s dispatchers were trained to identify calls from the 911 system or the non-emergency line that were non-violent and featured a behavioral health component and redirect them to CAHOOTS, which would then respond to the situation. CAHOOTS ended up answering 17% of the Eugene Police Department’s overall call volume in 2017, saving the department an estimated \$12 million.