

# **‘Anytime, anywhere, anyone’: How Dakota County has expanded its mental health crisis services — and shifted away from police involvement**

Dakota is showing other Minnesota counties how to implement the new law that requires 911 operators to refer calls involving mental health issues to crisis teams rather than to law enforcement.

By [Andy Steiner](#) | Contributing Writer

<https://www.minnpost.com/mental-health-addiction/2022/05/anytime-anywhere-anyone-how-dakota-county-has-expanded-its-mental-health-crisis-services-and-shifted-away-from-police-involvement/>



The Dakota Communications Center handles the county's 911 calls.  
[dakota911mn.gov](http://dakota911mn.gov)

Not so long ago, when a person in [Dakota County](#) called 911 for a mental health emergency, odds were high that the dispatcher would send a police officer to the scene. It was standard protocol — even if the person in crisis hadn't broken the law, wasn't violent or armed with a weapon. This approach changed last year, when state lawmakers enacted [Travis' Law](#), legislation requiring 911 operators to refer calls involving mental health issues to crisis teams rather than to law enforcement.



Tom Folie

Tom Folie, executive director of the [Dakota Communications Center](#), the department that handles the county's 911 calls, said that this change helped streamline his department's operations while improving safety for callers and emergency responders.

"Some people really don't want a law enforcement officer involved in their crisis," Folie said. "When officers show up as the default it's not ideal. When there is no crime, no threat of violence, no weapon, they are not the right response."

In the past, Folie explained, "Very occasionally," his operators would "send callers directly to the [mental health] crisis unit," but it wasn't standard procedure. Travis' Law requires dispatchers to assess each call and consider other options — a change he thinks is a long time coming.

"It really just meant getting people used to it," Folie said. "For forever and a day we'd been sending law enforcement to these kinds of calls. But it wasn't always the best choice. Now we're honing in on what the criteria are for handing calls off to the crisis unit." This extra step, he added, is "absolutely is a good idea. As a former law enforcement officer, I often wondered, 'Why am I at this call? Is law enforcement the best response?'"



Emily Schug

This major shift in 911 operations is one example of how Dakota County is expanding the way it supports the mental health of its residents, said Emily Schug, Dakota County social services deputy director. Over the last several years, the county has seen [a rise in requests](#) for mental health and substance use disorder assistance, and Schug and her team, with the support of the county board, are expanding their service offerings, using national [best practice frameworks](#) as their guide.

“We recognized that our response to mental health needs or substance use disorder needs requires a full continuum of health care response systemwide,” Schug said. To do this, she continued, Dakota County is looking at mental health from a more holistic perspective. “We aim to design a full array of culturally responsive services that meet people where they are at: Anytime, anywhere, anyone.”

With this goal in mind, Schug explained, Dakota County leaders are working in close partnership with public service systems including police, EMS, fire and 911; as well as with mental health providers; health care systems; community partners; justice system partners and people with diverse lived experiences. This approach focuses on bringing everyone together to tackle the issue — because mental health and addiction impact everyone.

“We are grateful for the support and collaboration — with all stakeholders, at all levels — as we work toward shared goals for safe, healthy communities,” Schug said. This collaborative approach has helped to strengthen Dakota County’s response to the national mental health crisis, she believes: “We are all learning together, and from each other, every day.”

### *Support for change*

Expanding mental health and addiction service options in Dakota County requires expanding the number of county workers focused on the issue. In 2021 the county board gave Schug’s department, enough funding, using state and federal sources, to nearly double its workforce, adding nine FTE employees to its crisis support team.

“Mental health and substance use issues affect all of us across all different areas,” Schug said. “Having that recognition from elected officials and policymakers is really important to this work.”

As project director for the East Metro Crisis Alliance, Roger Meyer runs monthly “Provider Connect” meetings for local workers focused on mental health crisis issues, including frontline crisis team managers, police departments and community providers like People Incorporated. “We share updates and trends and concerns,” he explained.

In recent years, Meyer said, “More and more people from Dakota County have been coming to these meetings,” where they learned about local resources that are available for people experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis. The increased presence of Dakota County staff at these meetings is emblematic of their commitment to tackling the issues head on, Meyer said.



Roger Meyer

“Dakota County is making amazing investments in mental health and substance use crisis intervention. They are making investments and adding mental health and substance use crisis services. That is way more than other counties are doing and it is happening way faster.”

The commitment to this change is evident in the county’s recent hiring practices, Meyer added.

“Their mental health crisis team has doubled. That is not happening anywhere else that I’ve heard of.”

With added staff comes the ability to expand the way all workers at the county view mental health and addiction treatment, Schug said. With more social workers on board, the county has been able to expand its follow-up for residents who have recently received crisis services, letting them know about support programs and other services that are available to aid their recovery. County staff learn about these services through programs like Meyers’ monthly Provider Connect meeting.

“After a crisis situation, we now have people who can follow up — either a social worker or a trained community response officer — to make sure that people have access and information about long-term service and supports,” Schug said.

Schug added that it is her goal that the county’s expanded commitment to the mental health of its residents will eventually grow into something she calls a “no wrong door” approach. This means developing, she explained, a well-trained workforce across all county offices, where, “someone in crisis can call any entry point and that call can lead to an effective response.”

### *‘The right people going to the right calls’*

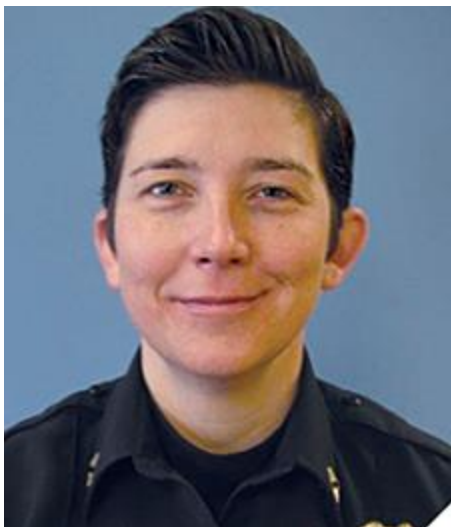
In the East Metro suburb of Mendota Heights, Dakota County’s expansion of mental health supports is felt every day in the city’s small Police Department.

Kelly McCarthy, Mendota Heights chief of police, was part of a group of police chiefs who have asked for financial support for increased crisis response. While Dakota County was responsive to her requests, McCarthy said the process, “like anything in government, had a long timeline.”

Then, when Travis’ Law went into effect, things started to change.

“We were all moving at the pace we were comfortable with, which, to be quite honest, is a snail’s pace,” she said, with a laugh. “The community was not OK with that. They worked to get Travis’ Law passed, which really upped the timeline.”

Before 911 operators began routing most mental health and addiction-related calls to the county’s crisis response team, McCarthy said officers in her 18-person department often felt out of place and ill-prepared when responding to a call about a person in mental health crisis. And sometimes, she said, when officers showed up, it was clear they were not welcome.



Mendota Heights Police Chief Kelly McCarthy

One example happened about a year ago. “Someone was in mental health crisis,” McCarthy recalled. “Their family called 911 and said, ‘We do not want police. We just need help transporting them to a facility.’”

At the time, McCarthy explained, Dakota County did not have the resources to send a crisis unit. “Here we have people saying, ‘Please don’t send the cops,’ but it was the only tool we had at the time. Thank goodness our officer was able to de-escalate the situation and it went well, but it could’ve been really bad.”

It’s not that officers don’t want to help people in mental health crisis, McCarthy said: “We get called and we respond in tandem with the crisis team.” But, she said, “We want the right people going to the right calls. We are trained in de-escalation. But there are people who do this kind of thing as their career. They are going to be better at it than we are.”

Sending a trained professional to help in a mental health crisis is more impactful than sending a police officer, McCarthy believes. It is not only safer for all involved, it is more of a long-term fix.

“If you have a leaky pipe you want a plumber, not someone who just knows how to stop the leak.”

These adjustments to the way 911 operators handle calls isn’t requiring Dakota County residents to change their behavior, Schug said: “Historically people have reached out to 911 for a whole variety of things.”

Instead, she explained that the system is reorganizing itself to better respond to callers’ needs. “The system historically hasn’t been resourced in a way that we can deploy the right type of mental health resources that people with mental illness or substance use disorder need in a crisis.”

The county board’s investment in boosting staffing levels makes that possible, she said.

“Our public safety officers do a great job. They have gone through crisis intervention training, but they also recognize that there is value in having people with specialized mental health training who can better handle these cases than they can. This is what this program is designed to do.”