



Fighting More than Fires: How San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District Innovated its Approach to Behavioral Health Crisis Response

Through its Firefighter First Response program, the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District created a more intuitive and streamlined approach to behavioral health crises that better serves its community members.

Recognizing the Opportunity for Change

Mental health calls to 911 have been on the rise in recent years.

“We have seen, in the past five years, an increase of upwards of 200 to 300 percent in mental health calls,” says Paige Meyer, Fire Chief of the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District.

Traditionally, when responding to behavioral health crisis calls, local law enforcement would take the lead while the fire department was responsible for “staging,” or coordinating the deployment of resources to an incident.

But as mental health calls rose, the district observed that a high volume of people were being sent to Psychiatric Emergency Services (PES) at a nearby hospital or healthcare facility who may be better served on the scene, including a significant number of involuntary holds for minors.

- **90%** of patients sent to PES were discharged within 24 hours and likely could have been better served on scene or at an alternative destination.
- **34%** of behavioral health incidents in 2023 involved minors placed on involuntary hold, which may not be in the best interest of the child.
- The average length of stay for minors in PES was only **18 hours**.

A Better Way Forward

To address these opportunities, the **Firefighter First Response program** was born in October 2023. This new response model reversed the approach so that paramedics, with their behavioral health expertise and healthcare training, were able to respond first to callers, while law enforcement stages.

Now, when a community member in the San Ramon Valley calls 911 to report a behavioral health emergency, Fire Protection District dispatchers triage callers in crisis and can either conduct a warm handoff to a California-based 988 Crisis Center or dispatch a San Ramon Valley fire resources directly to the caller.

The Firefighter First Response program ensures that help-seekers have the opportunity to engage with experienced healthcare providers and be connected to relevant services while also reducing the number of involuntary holds that often occurred within the previous response model.

The Impact

Since the implementation of the Firefighter First Response program, the City of San Ramon has seen:

- An **83.3%** diversion rate to Firefighter First response, which are no longer being processed as involuntary holds
- **6.3%** of behavioral health crisis calls now transferred to a 988 Crisis Center with no police or fire district staff are dispatched
- **16.3%** of calls get a fire district response only, with police staged and only called in if needed
- A **20.8%** reduction in the time it takes to deliver necessary support to callers, leading to faster processing time and resources released to be available for other emergencies

Patients are receiving more appropriate and timely care and avoiding unnecessary escalation or interventions that could otherwise lead to adverse impact to them and their families.

The district has improved its efficiency, effectiveness, and collaboration, preserving the capacity of fire, EMS, and police while improving experience of both callers and providers.

Finally, the community at large is benefiting from reduced strain on the mental health system, enhanced care, and improved trust in its local resources. San Ramon community members now know that, when calling in a mental health emergency, they can expect a consistent, trauma-informed response that provides them with the help they need.

To learn more about the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District and its Firefighter First Response program, visit: <https://www.firedepartment.org/>.

Improving Behavioral Health Justice in California

*This program and others like it are made possible by the **Behavioral Health Justice Intervention Services (BHJIS)** program.*

BHJIS provides funding to help local communities address critical intervention points through which individuals with mental and substance use disorders can be diverted from criminal justice involvement.

To learn more, visit:

<https://www.infrastructure.buildingcalhhs.com/grantees/ccmu/>