

BUSINESS OF THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF HALF MOON BAY

AGENDA REPORT

For meeting of: **March 4, 2025**

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council

VIA: Matthew Chidester, City Manager

FROM: Julissa Acosta, Management Analyst
Mary Huerta, Executive Assistant

**TITLE: UPDATE ON THE CRISIS ASSISTANCE RESPONSE & EVALUATION SERVICES (CARES)
MENTAL HEALTH RESPONSE PROGRAM**

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive an update on the Crisis Assistance Response & Evaluation Services (CARES) mental health response program and provide feedback and direction on the future of the program.

FISCAL IMPACT:

In its three years of operations, the cost of CARES services totaled \$1,346,566, of which the City General Fund contributed \$257,836; the County contributed \$75,000; and the remaining \$1,013,730 came from a series of Behavioral Health Justice Intervention Services (BHJIS) grants through the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS). Additionally, Kaiser Permanente provided a grant of \$25,000 for the procurement of an independent program evaluation, and the County provided funding for a new vehicle in 2023.

If the City were to extend the program through the end of the fiscal year, the cost would be an additional \$111,796. To continue the program through FY 2025-26, the cost would be an additional \$460,429, unless there were modifications to the service model. Funding sources for extending the program are described in the Discussion section below.

STRATEGIC ELEMENT:

This program supports the *Healthy Communities and Public Safety* element of the Strategic Plan.

BACKGROUND:

In Summer 2020, responding to the national movement around police reforms and the local killings of two individuals at the hands of law enforcement, the City Council prioritized community outreach and research related to public safety and law enforcement in Half Moon Bay.

The City launched a significant community outreach effort which ultimately resulted in, among other things, adopting the Yanira Serrano Presente! program and a recommendation to implement a mental health crisis response pilot program in Half Moon Bay. It was determined

that the best approach would be to partner with a third-party service provider to provide the services to the community. After gauging interest and accepting proposals from existing non-profit providers already serving the Coast, El Centro de Libertad (El Centro) was selected to work with the City on program design and provide services during the pilot stage, due to their well-designed proposal, existing staff, expertise, and infrastructure, as well as their ability to launch services quickly and effectively.

El Centro and the City launched the CARES program on March 16, 2022, providing a two-person mobile crisis response team with culturally and language competent de-escalation, crisis-intervention, motivational interviewing, and suicide prevention tools to work with individuals in crisis. Typical response calls include suicidal ideations, persons under the influence of drugs or alcohol, persons experiencing a mental health crisis, parents calling with concern for an adolescent youth exhibiting unusual behavior, or community members reporting persons in some form of emotional distress.

The CARES team was dispatched in instances where there was no immediate threat of violence, with Sheriff Deputies on standby when a higher level of response was needed. Following initial de-escalation and stabilization, the CARES team helped individuals develop a plan of treatment, provided warm handoffs to service providers, and followed up with status checks and resources. Ongoing collaboration with local and regional non-profits, County Health, the Sheriff's Office, and the community has been key to the success of the program and the long-term success of clients.

The initial pilot operated 40 hours per week and responded to calls within the City limits of Half Moon Bay, as well as the Moonridge community, with an original budget of \$150,000 coming equally from the City and the County of San Mateo. The pilot program was expanded to the entire mid-coast (Devil's Slide to Moonridge) and extended to seven days per week through a State grant, and additional general fund support continued the pilot through the end of FY 2022-23.

The project was initiated as a one year "pilot stage" program. As part of the process to move beyond the pilot stage, the City released a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) in May 2023, inviting qualified non-profit or government agencies to operate mental health crisis response services in Half Moon Bay and the surrounding Coastsides communities. El Centro de Libertad was selected as the most qualified responder and the City contracted with El Centro to continue operating the program for an additional year (with options to extend the agreement for up to a total of five years).

The program was able to continue through further investment from the City's General Fund, as well as the State's BHIIS grants, which eventually funded the entire program for the last two fiscal years. The last extension of the BHIIS grant expires on March 31, 2025, and the City's current agreement with El Centro expires concurrently. Without additional funding, El Centro will cease operations of the CARES program, and the services will terminate at the end of the month.

When the City and El Centro launched the CARES pilot in 2022, the hope was always to incrementally expand the program both on the Coastsides, but also throughout the County. Unfortunately, although many other cities have explored the CARES model, none have

implemented their own program or contracted with El Centro to provide CARES services elsewhere.

The County began exploring mental health response services in 2021. In 2022 they launched, in collaboration with the County's four largest cities (Daly City, South San Francisco, San Mateo, and Redwood City), the Community Wellness Crisis Response Team (CWCRT) Pilot program which pairs mental health clinicians with specially trained police officers to respond to mental health crises within those cities. The program expanded in 2024 to include three additional cities (Menlo Park, San Bruno, and East Palo Alto). In 2024, the County also launched the Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT), which in partnership with Telecare, operates a similar model to CARES, countywide on a 24/7 basis. The MCRT program includes Half Moon Bay and the greater Coastsides, but unfortunately in its first eight months of operations, very little utilization has been seen on the Coastsides. Accessing the MCRT services is currently more challenging than CARES (little outreach and marketing = little community awareness, no use of 911 dispatch, longer response times from the bayside), and the services are less community oriented and culturally competent due to the countywide nature of the program.

Due to the current challenges with accessing services from the MCRT program, staff recommends exploring options to continue the CARES program until MCRT services are more widely known and utilized on the coast, or until CARES services can be sustainably integrated into the County operations.

DISCUSSION:

During the three years the CARES program has operated, mobile crisis teams have responded to close to 1,000 calls for service, with another 1,000 follow-up responses. Of the total calls, approximately half included an initial co-response with other first responders, only 2% needed to be escalated to law enforcement, and close to 70% were diverted from jail or hospital services. In addition to responding to calls for mental health crises, CARES has supported first responders and other agencies in domestic disturbances, hostage situations, the mass shootings in 2023, and many other incidents where their specialized training and tools have brought a softer, more trusted approach to the community.

The CARES team has developed an especially strong relationship with the Sheriff's Office and is seen as an important resource for deputies to take a different approach to certain situations. Deputies are often able to pass individuals off to CARES responders, saving countless hours of first responder time, and freeing them up for other emergencies that require the specific tools and training that law enforcement is better equipped to handle. Overall, there is data and anecdotal evidence that the CARES team has increased trust in the community, made the community safer, and saved time, money, and resources in Half Moon Bay and throughout the Coastsides, as well as regionally in the criminal justice and medical systems.

Although the hope was to have transitioned the services provided by CARES to a more regional/Countywide approach by the end of the BHJIS funding, or to have found another more sustainable funding source, neither has come to fruition. With many other jurisdictions implementing similar programs throughout the state more recently, demands for funding have

increased and have been focused on starting new programs, not sustaining existing ones. Additionally, the County's MCRT program has been designed to offer similar services throughout the County, but given the Coastside's rural designation and limited pathways for travel, there is concern about MCRT's ability to respond to dynamic, often urgent situations in an acceptable amount of time. Staff are connected and collaborating with the County as it continues to roll out the program with the hope that it could someday offer the same level of impact and utilization on the Coast as CARES. Additionally, it is unclear if the original contract for these services, which expires in June of this year, will be extended.

This leaves the City in a tough position, as it continues to work toward eliminating a significant General Fund structural deficit. If additional funding is not made available to continue the CARES program, the Coastside will lose an important resource, which could have negative consequences on public safety and mental health in Half Moon Bay. As described above, an additional \$111,796 is needed to continue the program through the end of the fiscal year, and continuing the program through FY 2025-26 would cost an additional \$460,429, unless there were modifications to the service model. El Centro has presented some additional approaches to providing the service that could reduce the annual cost to as low as \$260,000 but would reduce service days and hours significantly.

A few funding options the City could consider:

1. The City and El Centro recently met with our BHJIS grant representative and received some cautiously optimistic news. In previous conversations, they had indicated that funding was no longer available and the BHJIS program would be winding down. It appears now that some additional funding is available, and they are considering supporting some of the previously funded programs. We have provided data and other information to support a request for additional funding, and we hope to hear back soon. There isn't yet an indication of the likelihood of receiving additional funds, in what amount, or for what period of time, but if some funds were received, they could potentially offset or supplement one of the options below.
2. Allocate \$111,796 from unassigned fund balance to continue the program through the end of the fiscal year. There wouldn't be an immediate impact on City services or the current structural deficit as these are one-time funds. However, once utilized, these funds would no longer be available for other programs or projects, nor for replenishing the City's Economic Uncertainty Reserve, a portion of which was utilized to balance the General Fund budget this current year.
3. Draw down and allocate \$111,796 from the City's Balancing Account with the Sheriff's Office to continue the program through the end of the fiscal year. This account is part of the Sheriff's contract, which is prepaid based on an estimated budget each year but only charged to actual costs of services. Typically, the City realizes some cost savings from the budget (usually due to salary/overtime savings and other operational savings), and the savings is deposited into the Balancing Account. The funds in the account are available for the City to use at its discretion, but a portion is typically reserved to cover any cost

overages that might occur, rather than pulling that funding from the General Fund. The City has taken disbursements recently to assist with the General Fund budget, and the current balance is over \$1 million. This could serve as both a short and mid-term solution to continue funding the CARES program, until a more sustainable source of funding is identified, or the program transitions to the County and/or is more effectively supplanted by the County's MCRT program. Much like Option 2 above, this money is available to draw down for any purpose, and thus can be treated like one-time General Fund dollars. Use of this funding for CARES does affect the City's ability to replenish reserves or fund other one-time program or project expenses.

4. Explore the use of \$111,796 of California Citizen's Option for Public Safety (COPS) Grant Funds to continue the program through the end of the fiscal year. The City receives \$100,000 in COPS grant funds each year which are restricted for projects, programs, and/or equipment intended to enhance the delivery of front-line public safety services in Half Moon Bay. These funds have not been used for the CARES program in the past, and additional research is required to determine if this is an allowable use. The City currently has approximately \$1.2 million in accumulated COPS grant funding but does utilize the funds for important public safety programs including the recently approved ALPR pilot program, augmented patrols during busy summer months, specialized tools and equipment, and enhanced traffic enforcement on holidays, special events, and especially busy weekends. The City needs to balance these needs with additional programs but could potentially use this funding to support the CARES program for a period of time.

CONCLUSION:

Ultimately, the Council will need to determine, in light of scarce resources and many important competing interests, whether the City should prioritize continuing the CARES program in the short or mid-term. If directed, staff will pursue any of the options above, or other ideas the Council might have on securing additional funding.

If Council determines that the City can no longer support the CARES program, staff and El Centro will work to wind down the program over the next few weeks and focus efforts on expanding awareness of the County's MCRT program and advocating for increased access, services, and improved response times for the Coastsides.

If the CARES program does come to an end, it will be a difficult time for the community. The City, El Centro, and the community should be proud of the work accomplished over the last three years. The CARES program resulted from tragedy, as well as the political courage of the City Council to push for something new and innovative, leading the way in a now nationwide effort to normalize and expand mental health crisis services to every community. The fact that the City was able to launch the pilot program with an initial \$75,000 investment, and through collaboration with community partners, County agencies, and resourceful staff, sustain a program for three years that was nationally recognized and provides a roadmap for other cities, is a boon for the Half Moon Bay community. Most importantly the program has saved lives and made our community a safer place to live and visit.