

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

OC police dispatchers send mental health team into crisis without guns

In blue vans, mental health workers take calls to help people in distress



Garden Grove Cpl. Luis Ramirez responds to a call along with the Be Well team on Wednesday, Oct. 19, 2022. Crisis Intervention Specialists Victor Reyes and Victoria Tran offer mental-health support, services and follow up. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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A police radio dispatched the partners — but there were no sirens, flashing lights, guns or handcuffs.

They pulled up in an electric-blue van, with “Hope HAPPENS HERE” emblazoned on a side, this time near a crowded intersection next to a McDonald’s off of Westminster Avenue in Garden Grove.

A half-dozen homeless people stood, sat, or laid on the front lawn of Coventry Meadows apartments. A year ago, officers would have taken the call, a typical one, asking them to remove the gathering. Instead, mental-health crisis workers Victoria Tran, who is also an EMT, and Victor Reyes approached the group armed with Kirkland granola bars and water.

“Have you heard about Be Well before?” Tran asked, and the pair then inquired if anyone needed anything besides the bars and water such as a referral to a shelter on the spot via an iPad (no), with half of the homeless eventually sauntering off and the Be Well van gliding away as well, soon headed to a domestic dispute call.

Be Well is part of a national groundswell, putting mental-health experts on calls that cops always took before, reducing the chance of tension-filled conflicts that can go deadly, matching the experts with those who might need them, and letting officers focus more on crime-related dispatches.

Be Well, like other such programs, is [modeled after CAHOOTS](#) (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets), which began in Eugene, Oregon, in 1989. In the past year, having Be Well has cost Garden Grove about \$1.4 million, with the mobile team responding to nearly 2,900 mental-health, domestic-dispute or homelessness calls, or for cuts and grazes, performing CPR and administering Narcan to counter opioid overdoses.

“We are extremely happy with the partnership with Be Well – they have been a wonderful resource for our Police Department and our community,” Assistant City Manager Lisa Kim said.

First launched in Orange County in August 2021, in Huntington Beach, Be Well mobile units now also serve Anaheim, Irvine and Newport Beach besides Garden Grove. Usually, the mobile team is composed of two mental-health specialists, dressed in unassuming polos and slacks. The only sign of their official business, besides the van, is a Be Well logo on the shirt and a radio pinned to a lapel.

In Garden Grove, one team is on duty at a time. Often, more than one shift works a day.

“When they do see us, it is a refreshing perspective because they’re not seeing law enforcement right away,” Tran said. “They’re seeing people in a blue van asking if they’re OK.”

For people under the influence, Be Well also offers rides to its 60,000-square-foot facility off of South Anita Drive near the UC Irvine Medical Center in Orange.

That facility is the epicenter of the nonprofit Be Well and has received funding from Kaiser Permanente and Providence St. Joseph Health, among others. Here, Orange County residents can get mental-health care and substance-abuse treatment regardless of their insurance situation. Among the amenities: There is a sobering center, where someone can stay until they are no longer intoxicated.

The three-story “campus,” as Be Well calls it, somewhat has the look of a tony hotel. The breezy inside space is replete with earth tones, wood floors, and chic, oblong lamps. There’s a small garden at the heart of the complex, a gym and a deck with patio space. Hallways are lined with patients’ artwork; succulents abound. Inspirational slogans similar to that on Be Well’s van are some walls.

“Care happens here,” one reads.

It was here where Mission Viejo resident Scott Anderson got sober after a downturn in his mental health triggered alcoholism. The pandemic cost Anderson his restaurant job and put people at a distance; as COVID-19 raged, he tried outpatient programs and hospital stays but nothing stuck.

“I was in a do-or-die situation where I needed help,” the Cal State Fullerton student said.

Faced with an ultimatum to “get sober or move out” of his home, Anderson recalled, he got into Be Well’s withdrawal-management program, where he stayed 11 days at the Orange facility for detox, managing the initial withdrawal symptoms. Then a room opened up for a longer stay, and Anderson spent another 90 days there, leaving in August 2021 — Be Well refers to this as a “graduation.”

“If it wasn’t for Be Well, I don’t know where I’d be right now,” the 25-year-old said.

Anderson has stayed in school and is employed now, full-time, with Be Well. Among his duties: He runs a weekly group for Be Well alumni.



Be Well vans offer an amnesty box for those who wish to surrender drugs without penalty, and rides to the Be Well campus or to hospitals or social-services offices.

Nguyen remembers a teenager taken to a boba shop so team members could hear her out after an explosive family argument. She felt understood, and cared for. Meanwhile, another Be Well team talked with the teen’s family.

A former combat medic in Iraq for the U.S. Army, Nguyen pointed out that the Be Well team members can spend a lot of time with those in need. They offer follow-ups, with a case manager assigned to clients and referrals to other services.

On calls, Be Well’s Garden Grove teams keep in constant contact with police. They have access to the police and fire dispatchers’ broadcasts. Dispatchers access whether only police should roll, or Be Well or both.

“We’re responding to the calls that police typically show up to with guns and body armor,” Nguyen said. “So it’s nice to tell dispatch where we are at. We can request an officer to respond with us at the same time.”

On some calls, officers will instruct the Be Well team to stand by, so they can ensure any weapons are removed from the scene, Nguyen said.

After the homelessness call, Tran and Reyes get back into the blue van and roll for several miles to a one-story house on a tree-lined street. A woman's ex-partner apparently had shown up and was yelling, cursing at her. He had left by the time Be Well pulled up.

Cpl. Luis Ramirez was already there. He asked Reyes and Tran questions for advice on his response.

"I ask (Be Well) for advice because I'm not a psychologist or a doctor," Ramirez said later. "They know more about this than we do." "I would have to go the criminal side of things, which is usually taking someone to jail," Officer Ramirez said. "If there's no crime involved, then we'd just have to see if the family can work it out."

After Ramirez bids goodbye to the woman and her kids to head off on another call, Be Well lingered. For 30 minutes, Reyes and Tran offered the woman's small children fidget spinners, made small talk about elementary school happenings and explained what resources could help the family.

Later, Sgt. Jeffrey Brown would say he has been "extremely impressed" with Be Well.

"There's been zero talks about ending the partnership — everything that's come from it has been extremely positive," the sergeant said.

For one thing, Be Well gives officers more time for other calls.

"It's really freed up our officers who may spend hours on a call for service that Be Well can take over," Brown said. "It allows our officers to deal with crime versus mental-health calls, which are not necessarily our specialty. We don't have all the mental-health resources Be Well has access to."



The original Be Well contract with the city of Garden Grove, much of it funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, was to expire in December. But at the City Council's Oct. 25 meeting, the panel voted unanimously to renew the contract until June 30, 2023, for an additional \$450,000.

On average, Garden Grove police had responded to 3,000-plus calls deemed for mental-health reasons, the assistant city manager said in a report, and more than 11,400 calls for homelessness, which can be tied to mental illness.

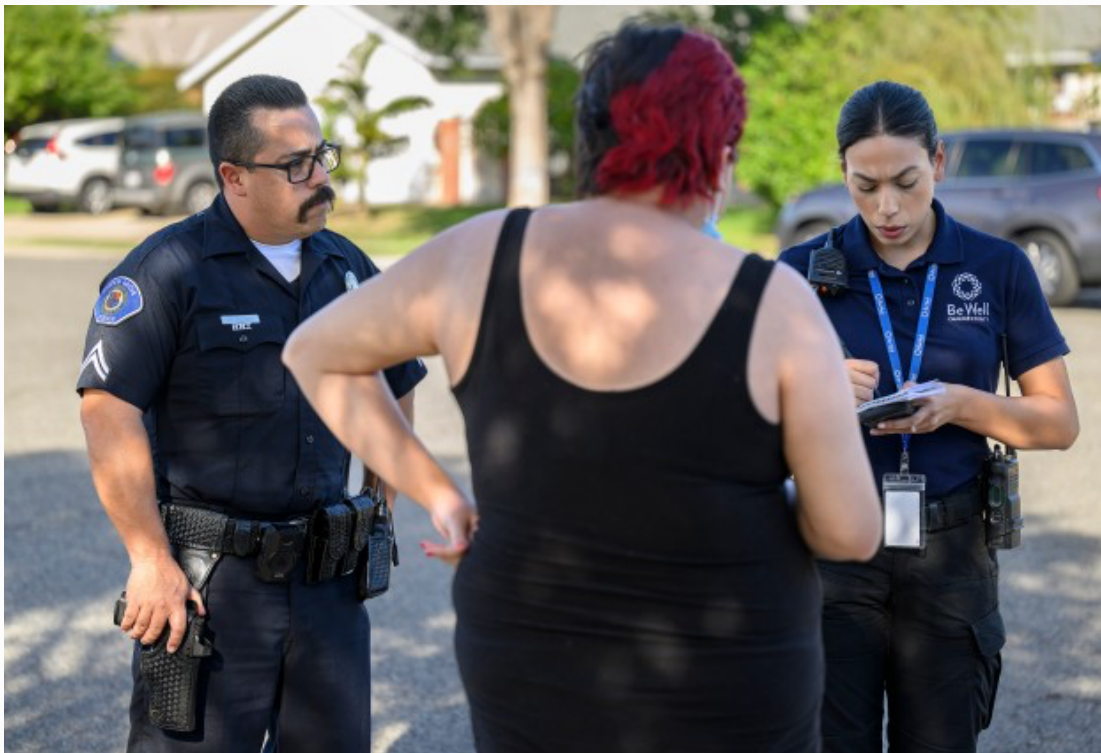
On 57% of Be Well's calls, which average 30 minutes, the teams did not officers to respond with them — the cops can now better respond to "critical emergency calls," Kim said.

As Tran and Reyes' time with the woman and her children winded down, there was another buzz over the radio.

Tran and Reyes, once again, hopped into the blue van and were off.



Be Well OC Mobile Response Team employees Victor Reyes and Victoria Tran chat with a woman after responding to a call on Wednesday, October 19, 2022. The pilot program seeks to destigmatize mental health and offer solutions and follow up for those in crisis. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



Garden Grove Corp. Ron Reyes works with Be Well OC Mobile Response Team employee, Ixa Niz, during a mental health call on Wednesday, October 19, 2022. The pilot program seeks to “humanize” people in crisis, provide services, and improve the outcome of police calls. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



BeWell OC Crisis Intervention Specialist Victor Reyes arrives on scene after police take a man into custody for allegedly swinging a stick and being violent on Wednesday, October 19, 2022. A woman who who witnessed the event became agitated and suspicious of the police and crisis workers.
(Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



Be Well OC Mobile Response Team Manager Tam Nguyen, left, chats with Linh Do, who called police about issues with homeless people in his Garden Grove neighborhood on Wednesday, October 19, 2022. The Be Well OC mobile unit is part of a pilot program that seeks to deal with mental health issues humanely and proactively. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



Be Well OC Mobile Response Team Crisis Intervention Specialist, Ixa Niz, is part of a pilot program that works on mental health calls with Garden Grove Police. She had just dropped off a woman at a mental health facility after the woman consented to treatment.(Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



The Be Well OC Mobile Response Team cruises through Garden Grove on the way to answering crisis police calls on Wednesday, October 19, 2022. The mobile unit is part of a pilot program that seeks to deal with mental health issues humanely and proactively. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)