

# New plan for 911 calls

## Suffolk diverting some to crisis hotline personnel

BY MICHAEL O'KEEFFE

michael.okeeffe@newsday.com

Suffolk County police dispatchers are diverting some 911 calls to crisis hotline workers in an attempt to de-escalate friction between responding officers and residents struggling with mental illness, county officials said Thursday.

The initiative is part of three programs the department unveiled and said are the result of the 1,000-page police reform plan approved by the county legislature in March 2021, which included changes in how police respond to calls about mental health crises.

Former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo ordered local governments to reform law enforcement agencies in June 2020, shortly after George Floyd was killed while in the custody of Minneapolis police. Floyd's death sparked months of nation-



Police Commissioner Rodney Harrison speaks at a news conference at the Family Service League in Hauppauge on Thursday.

wide protests over police killings and other misconduct.

On Thursday, the department also announced that officers who respond to calls involving people with behavioral health and substance abuse issues will use videoconferencing to work with social workers at the Diagnostic, Assessment and Stabilization Hub (DASH), a 24-hour crisis intervention

center, Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said.

The department will also refer residents with mental health issues who are the subject of three or more 911 calls in six months to the Family Service League, the social services organization that operates DASH and provides counseling, addiction treatment and other assistance, Bellone said

during a news conference at the FSL's Hauppauge office.

Bellone, Suffolk Police Commissioner Rodney Harrison and other officials said the programs will help residents suffering from mental illness get assistance while allowing officers to remain on patrol.

"The goal of these programs, these three programs, is to reduce the stigma around mental health, de-escalate tense situations, address gaps in behavioral health response, and ultimately, get those who are in crisis the treatment and the help that they need," Bellone said.

Harrison said about 150 calls have been diverted by 911 operators since June to the crisis hotline, while 173 people who have been the subjects of three or more 911 calls — the commissioner called them "high utilizers" — have been referred to the Family Service League for assistance. Nearly three-quarters of those referrals have resulted in positive outcomes, Harrison said.

"Connecting high utilizers to the necessary services allows our police officers to stay on patrol to make sure they are pro-

tecting our communities," Harrison said.

Bellone said the county committed an additional \$1 million for mental health response in its 2022 operating budget.

More than 20% of the Suffolk County Police Department's patrol officers have received enhanced mental health or crisis intervention training, Bellone said. Mental health first aid has also been added to the police academy curriculum, which means future generations of officers will know how to de-escalate situations involving individuals with mental illness. Officials hope to provide crisis training to at least four officers and one supervisor per squad.

Karen Boorshtein, president and CEO of the Family Service League, said mental illness and substance abuse has increased dramatically in recent years. Teaming up with Suffolk police, she said, will help people suffering from mental health issues get assistance.

"This project is designed to empower and strengthen our community by addressing and de-escalating situations in the community," she said.

JAMES CARBONE