


**LOS ANGELES FIRE DEPARTMENT**

KRISTIN M. CROWLEY  
FIRE CHIEF

August 14, 2023

BOARD OF FIRE COMMISSIONERS  
FILE NO. 23-080

TO: Board of Fire Commissioners

FROM:  Kristin M. Crowley, Fire Chief

SUBJECT: SOBER UNIT PILOT PROGRAM CONCLUSION

FINAL ACTION:	<input type="checkbox"/> Approved	<input type="checkbox"/> Approved w/Corrections	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn
	<input type="checkbox"/> Denied	<input type="checkbox"/> Received & Filed	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

### SUMMARY

Since 2017, the Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD) has operated the Sober Unit 4 pilot program in partnership with Exodus Recovery Inc. in the downtown Los Angeles area. The objective of the pilot program was to show that a firefighter/paramedic partnered with a nurse practitioner<sup>1</sup> (NP) or advanced medical provider can safely identify, screen, and transport emergency medical services (EMS) patients found to be suffering from alcohol intoxication to a sobering center (SC) rather than a hospital.

Pilot programs, like Sober Unit 4, have proven the ability of an advanced provider partnered with a firefighter/paramedic to safely identify and transport appropriate patients to a SC. Over the last five years, the practice of EMS providers transporting appropriate patients to a SC has moved beyond a novel pilot program to an authorized procedure. The Los Angeles County EMS Agency (LEMSA), which has regulatory authority over EMS provider agencies in Los Angeles County, has formalized the ability of EMS provider agencies to transport appropriate patients to a SC. This evolution in LEMSA policy will allow the LAFD to advance beyond the Sober Unit 4 pilot program.

The LAFD has determined that concluding the Sober Unit 4 pilot program and converting Sober Unit 4 from a narrowly focused mission to an Advanced Provider Response Unit (APRU) with a broad multifunctional EMS delivery mission will improve the delivery of services while maintaining the ability to transport appropriate patients to a SC.

<sup>1</sup> Nursing, C. B. of R. (n.d.). Advanced practice and public health nurse certification. California Board of Registered Nursing. <https://www.rn.ca.gov/applicants/ad-pract.shtml#np>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

That the Board:

1. Approve the termination of agreement number C-139108 with Exodus Recovery, Inc. relative to the Sober Unit pilot program.
2. Approve the redeployment of Sober Unit 4 as APRU 4.

## **FISCAL IMPACT**

The fiscal impact of elevating Sober Unit 4 to APRU 4 is limited to procuring additional advanced provider medical supplies costing approximately \$11,000. Existing EMS funding is sufficient to cover this cost.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Sober Unit 4 pilot program was deployed in November 2017, housed at Fire Station 4 in the downtown area, with the LAFD apparatus classified as a Paramedic Assessment resource. The joint staffing model consisted of an LAFD firefighter/paramedic partnered with two Exodus Recovery, Inc. staff members: one NP and one case manager. Through a letter of agreement, each agency funded the salary of their respective members to be deployed three days a week for 12 hours each day. On July 20, 2021, the Board approved a three-year renewal of said agreement.

The program was envisioned to provide a variance from the standard operating procedure of treating and transporting inebriated patients encountered in response to 911 calls for service to a hospital. Sober Unit 4 would respond to 911 calls for service where the NP would perform a medical clearance of patients and then transport them directly to the alternate destination SC. The objective was to match the patient with sobering services and decrease patient volume in already taxed hospital emergency rooms, thus freeing up hospital beds for higher acuity patients. Unfortunately, during and subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic, Exodus Recovery, Inc. has not been able to reliably provide staff for the Sober Unit 4 pilot program, causing the unit to sit idle and the assigned firefighter/paramedic to be detailed to other duties. Despite Exodus Recovery, Inc. staffing challenges causing sporadic availability of Sober Unit 4 in recent years, the pilot program has been an instrumental influence to the LEMSA adopting policies allowing the LAFD to transport to SCs.

Currently, the LAFD APRU program has the ability to identify and authorize the transport of appropriate patients to a SC, just as Sober Unit 4. However, while Sober Unit 4 is limited to a specific narrow patient population, an LAFD APRU has additional capabilities and a broader mission scope.

The LAFD APRU provides a multifunctional emergency medical response unit with a broad scope of practice that is well suited to supplement the LAFD's traditional EMS units in response to the City's demand for additional EMS capabilities. APRUs are

staffed by an LAFD advanced provider (nurse practitioner or physician assistant<sup>2</sup>) with a firefighter/paramedic. The APRUs can provide advanced medical assessments and treatments, clear patients for transport to a Sober Center or Psychiatric Urgent Care Center (PUCC), provide treatment-in-place resolutions for low-acuity medical problems, and make referrals to allied agencies for patients with elevated social risk factors such as people experiencing homelessness. The LAFD has also requested that the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health authorize LAFD advanced providers to write psychiatric holds, allowing transport to a broader number of PUCCs.

The City of Los Angeles and the LAFD have undertaken multiple pilot initiatives to address calls to 911 for non-traditional fire and emergency medical services. The APRU and its staff is a multifunctional emergency response unit that provides workload relief to rescue ambulances and fire companies, improving resource availability and response times. APRU staff provide advanced medical care and more appropriately respond to calls for psychiatric emergencies, serial inebriates, low acuity medical complaints, and can navigate referrals to allied agencies. Additionally, the APRU staff's ability to treat many non-life threatening medical complaints in place or authorize transport to an alternate destination can offload patients from impacted hospital emergency rooms.

Based on the evolution of LEMSA policy and Exodus Recovery, Inc.'s inability to reliably staff the Sober Unit 4 pilot program, the LAFD recommends concluding the pilot program. Utilizing existing positions, the LAFD can redeploy the apparatus utilized in the pilot program as APRU 4.

### **CONCLUSION**

The conclusion of the Sober Unit 4 pilot program and elevation of the unit to APRU 4 utilizing existing positions will allow the LAFD to provide more reliable availability of an EMS unit in the downtown Los Angeles area to authorize the transport of appropriate patients to an alternative destination (e.g., SC or PUCC). Additionally, elevating Sober Unit 4 to APRU 4 will provide improved services to more appropriately respond to the evolving calls for EMS.

Board report prepared by Tyler J. Dixon, Assistant Chief, Emergency Medical Services Bureau.

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<sup>2</sup> *What is a pa?. AAPA. (2023a, July 28). <https://www.aapa.org/about/what-is-a-pa/>*

