

LOS ANGELES FIRE DEPARTMENT



RALPH M. TERRAZAS
FIRE CHIEF

March 2, 2016

BOARD OF FIRE COMMISSIONERS
FILE NO. 16-031

TO: Board of Fire Commissioners

FROM:  Ralph M. Terrazas, Fire Chief

SUBJECT: MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY RESPONSES

FINAL ACTION: ☐ Approved
☐ Denied

☐ Approved w/Corrections
☐ Received & Filed

☐ Withdrawn
☐ Other

SUMMARY

Mental health emergencies comprise a significant number of our emergency responses, and they pose a major challenge for our Department.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Board:
Receive and file.

FINDINGS

From 2006 to 2011, total emergency department (ED) visits in Los Angeles County increased by 15% while mental health emergencies increased by 44%. In fact, mental health emergencies accounted for over 20% of the increase in ED volume in Los Angeles from 2006 and 2011, which accounts for almost 2 million additional ED visits.

In 2015 the LAFD responded to 11,805 incidents for mental health emergencies, resulting in over 20,000 actual emergency responses. Of these, over 7,000 resulted in ambulance transport to an emergency department. While we do not know the precise impact of patients with mental illness on our hospital wall time, it is known that these patients pose a greater likelihood of wall time when we do transport, since these patients cannot be placed in the waiting room. They must be placed in a designated psychiatric emergency room (ER) if one is available and there are open beds, or they must be placed in a room with a sitter. Therefore, transported mental health patients contribute a disproportionate percentage of our wall time.

Patients experiencing mental health emergencies pose obvious challenges for our Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and Paramedics. If the patient is awake and alert and presents with a mental health emergency (e.g. endorses suicidal ideation), our

EMTs and Paramedics can only provide transport to an ED. They are not trained to provide psychological counseling. Furthermore, many of these patients require pharmacological therapy to ameliorate their symptoms, and such treatment is outside the EMT and Paramedic scope of practice. Furthermore, many patients with mental health emergencies are very volatile and are often combative. As such, they pose a potential threat to the safety of our personnel. In addition, many patients with mental health emergencies also have coexisting illicit drug intoxication, which makes them even more at risk. We have had numerous instances where patients with mental health issues have physically attacked our members, including one patient who stabbed one of our EMTs upon arrival to the hospital.

Mental health patients are a growing problem for our department and the local emergency health care system. Out of the 60 receiving hospitals for the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD), only 15 are Lanterman-Petris-Short (LPS) designated psychiatric facilities. There are currently no diversion criteria for mental health patients in Los Angeles County. Thus, patients with mental health emergencies and no other medical issues must be transported to the nearest open ED in accordance with existing geographic catchment areas.

While the LAFD responds to patients with mental health emergencies all over the City, the largest concentration of these patients appear to be in Battalions 11, 1, and 18. Many of these areas have a large number of homeless individuals, particularly in the downtown "skid row" area.

The LAFD is working on increasing its coordination with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) Mental Evaluation Unit (MEU). The MEU has over 100 full time positions, including both uniformed police officers and trained mental health professionals who work together to address this growing issue. In addition, the LAPD SMART teams, which are expanding to 17 teams City-wide, are located within the MEU, so a better coordination of these efforts is necessary. This is one of the goals of the new Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Bureau's Public Health Division.

We have also requested the creation of an LAFD Mobile Mental Health Unit (MHU) as part of our proposal to address the Los Angeles Homelessness Initiative. This MHU would be staffed by a Nurse Practitioner (NP) and an LPS-certified social worker. This team would be dispatched on mental health patients and could also be requested by resources on scene with these patients. The NP would perform a medical clearance and the social worker would perform a mental health screening exam. The MHU can then either refer the patient for mental health follow-up; transport the patient to a walk-in mental health facility; transport the patient to an LPS-designated ED; or place the patient on an involuntary hold and transport the patient directly to an open in-patient psychiatric facility. This MHU proposal would bring a highly trained team to address mental health patients and provide the proper disposition, rather than sending fire companies and paramedic ambulances and then transporting these patients to the nearest ED. The current system only serves to further strain an already overburdened EMS system, increases our wall time, and does not serve the best interests of these

vulnerable patients. If shown to be successful, the Department would then seek funding to create additional MHUs.

Our members only get basic training on mental health emergencies during their EMT and paramedic training. These are challenging patients and their needs are not easily addressed in the prehospital environment. As we have seen across the nation, patients with mental health emergencies pose a significant challenge for both law enforcement and EMS.

FISCAL IMPACT

The growing number of LAFD responses to patients with mental health emergencies is placing an increasing demand on our already strained EMS delivery system. These responses, compounded by the increase in wall time, will necessitate funding of additional emergency resources in the field. The Department has already requested funding for the first Mobil Mental Health Unit on a trial basis. If this is successful, the creation of additional MHUs will require ongoing increases in our annual budget.

CONCLUSION

Patients requesting LAFD assistance for mental health emergencies pose a growing challenge for our department. We are exploring innovative approaches to confront this important issue to try to bring properly trained mental health professionals to these patients, and then provide the proper disposition to best address their needs.

Board Report prepared by Marc Eckstein, MD, MPH, LAFD Medical Director.