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Alternative Transportation Model Implemented for Persons Experiencing Mental Health Crisis

November 1, 2021 marks a big change in how Oklahoma addresses mental health crisis. Legislation passed last spring has gone into effect that allows the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services the ability to transport people experiencing a mental health emergency. Prior to the change, law enforcement officers were primarily responsible for crisis transport. The new law will allow for alternative transportation options.

ODMHSAS is implementing a regionally-based alternative transportation service throughout Oklahoma in partnership with local transportation vendors. This new system will provide an alternative transportation service that the department expects to fundamentally transform how children and adults requiring inpatient psychiatric treatment are transported to higher level treatment settings.

The change is being hailed by behavioral health advocates as a significant step toward eliminating stigma and decriminalizing mental health.

“The back of a police car, in handcuffs, is not the best place for someone experiencing mental health crisis,” said ODMHSAS Commissioner Carrie Slatton-Hodges. “It often exacerbates the situation and creates a perception of criminality that in turn furthers a reluctance among many to ask for help before crisis occurs.”

Now, alternative transportation vendors contracting with the ODMHSAS will provide transportation services using unmarked vehicles with specially trained drivers to securely assist individuals with getting to the nearest treatment facility, when that facility is greater than 30 miles away. Providing safe and secure transportation that is trauma informed and focused on the individuals’ engagement in recovery treatment is the ultimate goal of this systems transformation.

Law enforcement officials have been some of the more vocal proponents of this change, advocating for a better practice that provides a more appropriate transportation option and promotes operational efficiency.

“This change will have a significant impact for law enforcement agencies throughout Oklahoma,” said Ray McNair, director of the Oklahoma Sheriffs’ Association. “It addresses the need for a more appropriate transport option concerning individuals experiencing mental health crisis. It also addresses the growing problem of transport costs and personnel time that has negatively impacted law enforcement agency budgets, and taken officers out of their communities resulting in the reduction of available public safety response.”

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Law enforcement involvement is not eliminated with this change. Officers are still responsible to assist transporting individuals in need of treatment if the closest treatment facility is within 30 miles. ODMHSAS will work within the existing regionally-based treatment system infrastructure to help facilitate the dispatch of transport services for those in need of acute psychiatric treatment greater than 30 miles.

Legislation defines the 30-mile parameter relative to a law enforcement officer's operational headquarters.

"I am excited for this change, but also know that there will be some growing pains early on," said McNair. "I look forward to working with the department as this unfolds, and being part of helping to build this system for the benefit of all Oklahomans."

ODMHSAS has been working with numerous organizations for the past several years to discuss how such a system might work in Oklahoma, and has studied similar efforts in other states. The intent has always been to create a structure that best serves the diverse needs of Oklahoma.

"We are grateful to all our partners including Governor Stitt, our state legislature, law enforcement officers, hospitals, and the numerous community stakeholders involved helping to make this transition successful," said Slatton-Hodges. "With any major system change, we anticipate opportunities to learn and improve along the way."

"We thank all of our partners in advance as we all transition toward a better way to support the mental health and overall well-being of all Oklahomans."

For more information about the new transportation system, how the process works and regional transport service options, visit the ODMHSAS web site at www.odmhsas.org.

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