

NEWS

'To me this hits home': Falls Township recovery specialists going beyond 911 calls to address addiction, mental health

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As the remnants of Hurricane Ida tore across the region, Allison Howe was weathering another storm as her son was caught in a mental health crisis and struck by a truck.

Despite dealing with widespread damage caused from Ida, including tornadoes and flooding, the police officers who responded were understanding and were able to subdue him and get him into an ambulance to take him to a hospital, the Falls residents remembers.

Then, shortly after a two week hospitalization, more help came from the township, Howe said. This time it was Susan Daley, a member of the township's recovery specialist program, checking in and offering assistance.

"She said any service that we might need help with she could help us with," Howe said.

The call, she said, made a difference.

"To me this hits home," Howe said.

For Daley and fellow recovery specialist Laura Craig this is the job as they see individuals and families in need daily since the program began about eight months ago..

Daley and Craig, who have been through addiction and treatment themselves, are based in the township police department and have a focus on helping people suffering from substance abuse or drug issues. While drugs were not the problem in the instance with Howe's son, they still connected to make sure everything was OK.

Daley said she also has a background in mental health.

"It was really cool being able to follow up and be able to assist him as well," she said.

The unit was created in February, and is one of several different police initiatives in Bucks County that aimed to change the way police respond to incidents, especially those rooted in addiction and mental health. The initiatives came amid calls for changes in policing after the police custody death of George Floyd in May 2020.

Generally, Daley and Craig help connect residents in active addiction or substance abuse, to whatever treatment they might need.

"We've been starting to see more success stories the longer we've been doing it," Daley said.

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The unit, which is funded through a grant by the Bucks County Drug and Alcohol Commission, runs during normal business hours Monday through Friday.

If they are not there to respond to a call themselves, the specialists are given reports of the incident and will do follow-up shortly after. Additionally, the two will go to areas where people might be suffering from addiction, such as motels, to reach more people.

"If we can get to see more people be willing to go to treatment, that would be awesome," Daley said.

The two go out to different substance abuse-related calls, should it be necessary. How long they talk depends on how much those in need are willing to engage.

"It could be five minutes, it could be hours," Daley said.

The unit checks in with people they have contact with every 30 days for a period of 90 days.

They will also connect with families of those who have overdosed to connect them with any help they may need. Daley said she lets families know about various counseling services, if they are interested.

In the few months the unit has been operating, they have already seen positive effects.

Cpl. Michael Wolverton, who oversees the specialists, said one man who has substance abuse

hasn't called the department in months, he said, thanks to Daley and Craig's help. They were able to connect him with the necessary assistance.

"I think it's going really well," Wolverton said.

Both of the specialists said they have been getting to know the officers in the department, and are teaching them about the various aspects of recovery. Daley said she is telling the officers what it is like to go through the process of recovery.

"Pretty much everyone is aware of who we are and what we can do now," Daley said.

Diane Rosati, head of the Bucks County Drug and Alcohol Commission, said Falls was chosen for the program because it has had a higher percentage of overdoses in the past few years.

Whitney has said the leading cause of death in the township is drug overdoses. In 2020, there were 129 overdoses, nine of which were fatal, the chief said.

"We have high expectations and high hopes that we're going to make a good impact in the community," Rosati said.

Both Daley and Craig have had experience with treatment and have gone through it before, Rosati said, which allows them to have better connections with those struggling with addiction or substance abuse-related issues.

"Like so many things we've figured the folks who are most impactful, are folks who have lived the experience and can perhaps relate," she said.

Daley said she got sober when she was 25, after her family encouraged her to go through treatment.

She said she spent two years in a recovery house, and became knowledgeable about it. Eventually she was given an opportunity to oversee more than a dozen recovery houses in the area because of her expertise.

Last year, she quit that job and took a new position at Family Services of Bucks County, which put her in the position she has now.

Her personal experience, coupled with her time managing recovery houses, gives her the ability to assess the needs of someone going through addiction, she said.

Her knowledge not only lets her connect, but also how to approach them, Daley said. She's been through what they went through, and knows what they are going through.

“When they see me in the vest, at first, they think I’m a cop,” she said. That changes as soon as she begins to talk to them and they realize she's just a normal person trying to help.

The two also hand out Narcan and educate those who might need help on how to get it. Those who are not ready for treatment know they have a contact at the township should they change their mind.

“They’ve already made quite an impact with family members,” Rosati said.

Whitney said the two have been able to reach out to residents and form ongoing relationships.

“It’s nice for families, when they have a loved one, when they are struggling with a substance abuse issue, to have help literally show up at their front door,” he said.

“That extra outreach is really important to residents,” Rosati said.

Falls will soon be getting their own co-responder, a social worker who will respond to various mental health-related calls with police. Whitney and Rosati believe there will be some overlap between the work of the two units.

“We expect that those staff will work really close together,” Rosati said.

Both members of the specialists unit and Rosati hope that the services eventually expand beyond the township. Rosati commended the work of Daley and Craig.

“They have clearly made an impact already,” she said.

That was evident in Daley's call to Howe in the weeks following her son's incident. She said Daley's call to her family showed that there was someone out there that can direct them in the right way.

“Our whole family thinks it's phenomenal,” she said.

Other Bucks County Police initiatives

Bucks County Police Assisting in Recovery, or BPAIR, which was started by Bensalem police, is a program that allows people to come to participating police departments to get connected to help for substance abuse problems. More than a dozen Bucks County police departments participate in the program. More information may be found at www.bcdac.org

Central Bucks Regional Police created a victim specialists unit, which consists of two people who help victims of crime through the criminal justice system. Doylestown Township police, New Hope police, Plumstead police and Buckingham police also participate in the program.

Plumstead police have a program called "Supporting Treatment and Recovery Program," or STAR, which lets officers refer those who need substance abuse help to Aldie Counseling Center in Doylestown. Buckingham police, Central Bucks Regional Police, Doylestown Township police, New Hope police and Solebury police all participate in the program.