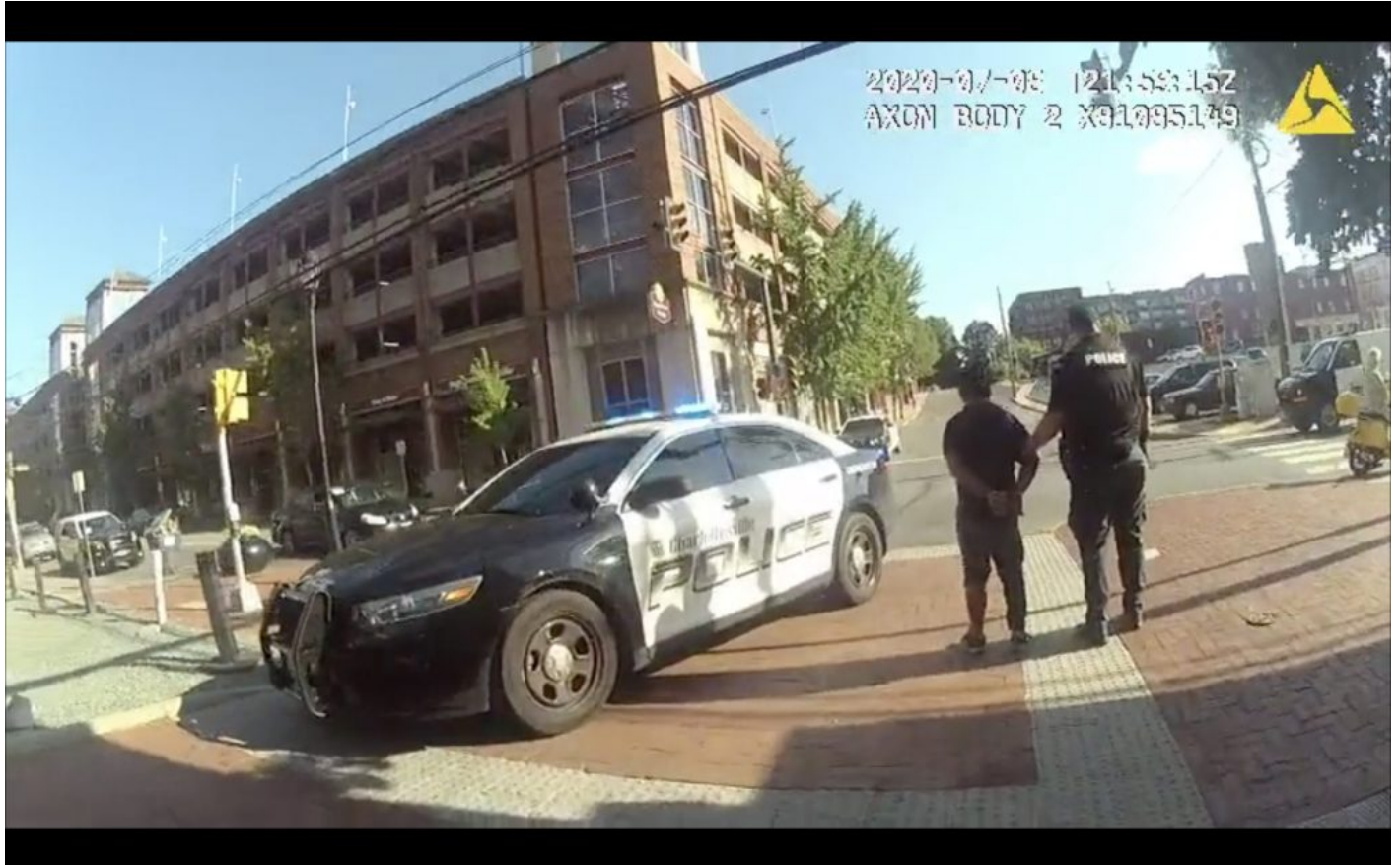


Region Ten director suggests community mobile crisis service to respond to some 911 calls instead of police

written by Newspark Team | July 16, 2020



On July 8, a 911 call was placed regarding a man lying on the ground of the Charlottesville Downtown Mall. Responders included the city's fire and police departments, as well as the Charlottesville-Albemarle Rescue Squad. Within the duration of a 17-minute recording released via the police officer's body camera, the man was arrested. His crime? Public intoxication, and later, obstruction of justice and assaulting an officer. The man, 36-year-old Christopher Lee Gonzales, has no fixed residence and, according to the Virginia Judiciary Online Case Information System, has accumulated previous public intoxication charges in Charlottesville, Albemarle County and Virginia Beach.

In recent months, activists and officials alike have acknowledged that law enforcement officers might not always be the best first responders to situations that could be handled by or with support from mental health experts or social workers. The idea, activists say, fits into calls for defunding police departments — a proposal that ranges from dismantling and creating something new to divesting funds from law enforcement into social programs and organizations.

Meanwhile, one such social organization that has a history of collaborating with crisis-trained law enforcement officers could bring a new type of response model into the community.

Lori Wood, director of emergency and short term stabilization services at Region Ten Community Service Board suggests a mobile crisis service that could be deployed with or in place of law enforcement for some calls related to mental health or substance abuse.

"If we[the community] had mobile clinicians who we could deploy along with the police to be able to

respond, or in place of the police in some cases, then we could do a better job of being able to respond in that moment ... and have it be a multidisciplinary approach,” Wood explained. “If the police need to be there, OK, but if you don’t have a history of violence or any need for that kind of intervention, ... then we [the community] could have an alternate way for you to get help in that moment that’s not ‘Well, we’ve got to wait until tomorrow when the clinic is open.’”

According to a city of Charlottesville press release, the initial call regarding Gonzales was placed because he had been lying on the Downtown Mall. Charlottesville Tomorrow requested the recording of the call through a Freedom of Information Act Request but the regional emergency communications center denied it, citing state code that makes it exempt due to it being part of a criminal investigative file.

Gonzales, whose last name in some court records is spelled Gonzalez, was awakened and interacted with the first responders — the first of which to arrive and who assumed control of the situation was a Charlottesville Police Department officer.

Though the responding officer’s body camera detached during their interactions, a video posted to Instagram by a bystander on the mall shows some of what the body camera did not. There is a gap from when the officer’s camera fell to the ground and the Instagram footage began that was during the time when Gonzales allegedly resisted arrest. The Instagram footage shows the officer kicking Gonzales before pinning him to the ground in what appears to be a chokehold as he awaited more officers. Other first responders had already been dismissed.

As conversations surrounding police and crisis response reform have been underway between activists and officials, Charlottesville Police Chief RaShall Brackney has spoken in favor of what she calls “decoupling” police departments.

During a June Albemarle-Charlottesville NAACP event, she said police officers should not be responsible for responding to societal issues like homelessness and mental health.

“We keep criminalizing social ills,” Brackney said at the online event. “You make officers social workers with guns and handcuffs. The less likely you are to have police intervention, the less likely you are to have a bad outcome.”

Charlottesville Tomorrow asked Brackney about how CPD could collaborate with or support a potential mobile crisis service, but a response was not received at the time of this publication.

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Since 2006, Charlottesville has been part of the Thomas Jefferson Area Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), which includes training police officers on how to work with people who exhibit signs of mental illness or substance abuse. Training is also available to the Charlottesville Albemarle Regional Jail, the Central Virginia Regional Jail and 911 emergency dispatchers.

According to Tom von Hemert, who is the CIT coordinator for the area, the need stems from the number of incarcerated individuals who have mental illness as well as the rates of recidivism for such individuals. He and Wood say that CIT-trained officers can be requested for response calls by Region Ten or a person placing a 911 call.

Another task of CIT is to further develop local crisis intervention through a task force composed of various representatives that include various social services like mental health and homelessness.

“Every month, I host what I call the CIT Crisis Review Team. It has literally all those players come together,” von Hemert explained. “We meet once a month and talk about ‘Who are we concerned about? Is it someone we are seeing over and over again? Is it somebody new on the caseload and how can we work closer and better together?’”

Von Hemert, whose office is within those of Region Ten, also said that he thinks “that each service organization — whether it is mental health, law enforcement, medical ... we all work well in our own silos. I think the problem is that we need to get out of that. We need to take a holistic perspective instead of a narrow agency perspective.”

Charlottesville Tomorrow asked city councilors how the idea of a mobile crisis service could be supported by council. Only Sena Magill and Lloyd Snook responded by the time of publication.

Snook said he thinks there is general interest in the idea and recommended the example of the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) program in Eugene, OR, which operates similarly to what Wood suggests.

“I fully believe that this is something the community should pursue. Policing should not be involved in mental health or social services crises. The training officers get in controlling a situation often escalates the symptoms of mental health (this is why the Crisis Intervention Training was started),” Magill said in an email. “While the majority of officers in the Charlottesville Police department receive CIT training, it is not designed to take the place of a mental health professional’s years of training.”

Magill, who has previously worked for Region Ten, suggests that cultural competency also be included in training.

“Cultural competence is extremely important in mental health, I have seen too many times where one’s cultural beliefs or behaviors or language barriers are misinterpreted by the professional,” Magill explained.

Unlike the formal uniforms of law enforcement officers, Magill also suggests that professionals for a mobile crisis service be dressed casually and “in a manner that signals they are approachable.”

To achieve a mobile crisis service, Magill said the City Council could advocate to the General Assembly and ask that they become a standard part of community service boards or police departments. She also said that the council can play a role in helping financially support such a service but notes the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the economy at present.

“I am very cautious about taking on new expenditures when we need to be planning to help people keep their homes and children safe and learning,” Magill explained.

In the meantime, Gonzales’ next hearing date is scheduled for September and, according to CPD, his case also is currently under an internal affairs investigation.