



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Albemarle

Program Title: Human Services Alternative Response Team (HART)

Program Category: Health and Human Services

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Ann Wall

Title: Deputy County Executive

Signature: *Ann E Wall*

VACO Achievement Awards

Human Services Alternative Response Team (HART)

Albemarle County, VA

Executive Summary

Recognizing that mental health incidents were increasing year-over-year, Albemarle County began rethinking its response approach to behavioral health emergencies to better serve the community.

While first responders receive Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) to learn strategies to assist community members in crisis with empathy and understanding, the amount of time spent on these calls for service was taxing on Albemarle County's public safety departments.

Albemarle County looked at the data and the needs of the community and formed the Human Services Alternative Response Team, or HART. HART is a multi-disciplinary team managed by the Department of Human Services in close collaboration with the police and fire rescue departments. HART is not a service that residents can directly request or call; team members proactively stay informed on behavioral health calls and initiate a response and follow-up when necessary. This response model offers an opportunity for law enforcement, behavioral health providers, and emergency services personnel to work together to respond and provide crisis support and to follow-up with connection to services and navigation.

In its first six months of deployment, HART responded to nearly 150 individuals in varying states of behavioral crisis. The majority of those calls for service involved multiple follow-up contacts. As of June 2024, the team has served 379 individuals in the community, 331 of which were suffering from a mental health crisis and another 48 struggling with substance use. This data underscores just how important this new team is to respond to the needs of Albemarle County.

Narrative

Each year, Albemarle County Police Department (ACPD) officers respond to hundreds of mental health calls for service, spending thousands of hours working with people in crisis. Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, mental health incidents have increased year-over-year. According to the National Institute of Health, more than 90% of officers on patrol have an average of six encounters with individuals in crisis per month, and between 7-10% of all police encounters involve individuals affected by mental illness.

In 2023, ACPD saw a 15.7% increase in mental health calls for service. While first responders in Albemarle County receive Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) to learn strategies to assist community members in crisis with empathy and understanding, the amount of time spent on these calls for service was taxing on Albemarle County's public safety departments' ability to respond to other calls for service in the community. Alternative first response programs reduce unnecessary police contact, thereby decreasing the burden on the first responder system and instead connecting residents to the care and resources they need.

Creating systems that provide care-centered responses for people experiencing mental health crisis is a crucial component of building safe, healthy, and equitable communities and in line with Albemarle County's Comprehensive Plan (AC44).

The Marcus David-Peters Act, or Marcus Alert, became law in 2020 to direct all community services boards and behavioral health authorities throughout the Commonwealth "to develop and establish a mental health awareness response" by July 1, 2026. Implementation of the national 988 suicide and crisis lifeline in July 2022 further opened the door for communities to reimagine who responds to emergency calls, what a community-led alternative first response can look like, and where people can be directed during moments of crisis or distress.

In April of 2022, ACPD launched a pilot program with Region Ten to open a Crisis Intervention Team Assessment Center (CITAC) at the Region Ten offices. This pilot model provided people in crisis an environment outside of the emergency department and the criminal justice system for proper intervention, assessment, and care, while also allowing patrol officers to return to service more quickly. In response to the data, community concern, and the successful pilot of CITAC, Albemarle County began discussion in the fall of 2022 on what an alternative first response could look like in our own community.

Funded by the Board of Supervisors in the Fiscal Year 2023 budget, Albemarle County officially launched HART in July 2023. Unlike traditional emergency response models that rely heavily on law enforcement, the HART program takes a proactive and multidisciplinary approach to crisis intervention. One of the key innovative aspects for the HART program is its emphasis on collaboration not only with our internal departments—human services, fire rescue, and police—but also with various community stakeholders like Region Ten and Partner for Mental Health. By bringing together diverse expertise and leveraging community resources, the program offers behavioral health and navigation services to support individuals in crisis. Overall, HART represents a shift in Albemarle County’s emergency response for mental health and substance use calls for service, moving away from punitive and reactive approaches to a more holistic, collaborative, and proactive model.

The Implementation of HART

Public safety is a core function of government. It is critical that as the public’s safety needs shift, government adapts its services.

Albemarle County’s alternative response model brings together human services, fire rescue, and police. The County identified that these three departments would inherently be the most

comprehensive and effective in addressing the diverse needs of individuals in crisis. This model recognizes that crises often stem from a complex interplay of social, medical, and behavioral factors.

Including human services in the alternative response model ensures that individuals in crisis have access to a wide range of social support services, such as housing assistance, mental health counseling, and financial assistance. The County's human services professionals are trained to assess individuals' broader needs and connect them with the appropriate resources and support systems to address underlying issues and promote long-term stability and well-being.

Incorporating fire rescue services is crucial for addressing medical emergencies and ensuring the safety of individuals in crisis. Fire rescue staff are trained in emergency medical care and can provide immediate medical assistance to individuals experiencing injuries, overdoses, or medical emergencies related to mental health conditions.

Finally, involving police in the alternative response model acknowledges their role as first responders and, while police officers alone may not always be the most appropriate responders for mental health crises, their training in crisis intervention and de-escalation techniques can be invaluable in managing volatile situations and ensuring the safety of everyone involved.

The three-person team operates generally Monday to Friday, 8 am to 5 pm, and monitors calls for service that are behavioral health related and conducts follow-ups when necessary. HART is regularly joined by a behavioral health navigator from Partner for Mental Health as well as a substance use specialist.

The annual operating cost of the program is approximately \$400k, which includes three full-time staff positions (one police, one fire rescue, and one human services) and a contract for the behavioral health navigator to assist the team as they connect patients with resources.

Because of the program's early success, Albemarle County's FY25 budget will continue to further support HART by adding three full-time positions for another team—one from each department. It is the County's hope that with two teams operating, HART can expand its in-service time, as well as keep up with the increasing demand for mental health calls in Albemarle County.

Program Results

In its first six months of deployment, HART responded to nearly 150 individuals in varying states of behavioral crisis. The majority of those calls for service involved multiple follow-up contacts. As of June 2024, the team has served 379 individuals in our community, 331 of which were suffering from a mental health crisis and another 48 struggling with substance use.

At the heart of this team is helping people, so it's important to look past the numbers and stats and hear about the lives touched by HART's work. A recent email sent to a HART member from an individual they worked with notes acutely what this service means to the people it serves - "Knowing that there are people in the community who have my back and see me as a person beyond my illness gave me the confidence to secure re-entry into the community...I am more hopeful for the future than I've ever been, and I wanted to let you know that your visit made a difference in my life."

Beyond the immediate impact on the lives of those that HART responds to, there has been community-wide support for the program. News stories throughout the team's first year highlighted their purpose, increasing the public's awareness of their mission. The high visibility of the team's goals, along with the clear understanding of the issue they are addressing, were supporting factors for the formation of the second team in the upcoming fiscal year.



Albemarle County HART members: Stephen Hitchcock, HART Program Manager, Department of Human Services; Assistant Fire Marshal Titus Castens, Department of Fire Rescue; Sue Hess, Partner for Mental Health; and Officer Brian Miller, Police Department.



HART members on a call for service. The individual in crisis was taken to a treatment center, the fire rescue department was able to assess the home's air quality, and the police department was able to contact the Animal Protection Unit to check on the individual's animals.



HART members distributing blankets to the unhoused population in Albemarle County. Thanks to a community partnership with the Charlottesville Area Quilters Guild, volunteers made the blankets that HART handed out. The unhoused population is just one portion of the community that HART responds to, but this is an example of how HART builds relationships and trust.