

Date: August 10, 2020

To: Thomas B. Modica, City Manager



From: Xavier Espino, Fire Chief



For: Mayor and Members of the City Council

Subject: **Homeless Education and Response Team (HEART) Status Update**

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At its July 7, 2020 meeting, the City Council directed the City Manager to work with the Fire Chief to present a report on Long Beach's Homelessness Education and Response Team (HEART), to include data on calls for service, proactive contact with people experiencing homelessness, and collaboration with Continuum of Care (CoC) partners.

The Fire Department placed the first HEART Unit into service on November 30, 2016, with the mission of reducing the number of Fire Department responses to people experiencing homelessness through rapid response to 911 calls for service, collaboration with CoC partners, and community and Fire Department education regarding local resources and issues surrounding homelessness. During its first year of operation, in addition to responding to a high volume of calls, the HEART Unit had great success connecting individuals with CoC resources, including drug and alcohol rehabilitation facilities, domestic violence shelters, and temporary shelters. Due to the success of the first HEART Unit, a second HEART Unit was added as part of the Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 19) Budget.

The two HEART Units are each staffed with two Firefighter/Paramedics. HEART Units monitor their radios for calls in their immediate vicinity that potentially involve a person experiencing homelessness. Team members determine which calls to respond to, based on field experience and the nature and location of the call. From July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020, the HEART Units have responded to 1,437 incidents. In 1,245 (87 percent) of these incidents, one of the HEART Units was the first arriving unit on scene. In 145 cases, HEART Units were able to fully resolve the issue and cancel other dispatched units. During the same 12-month period, HEART Units also made approximately 4,900 mental health referrals. This includes referrals of people experiencing homelessness to hospital emergency departments, mental health facilities, law enforcement, and substance abuse facilities. This year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the HEART Units have also been helping people experiencing homelessness to determine whether they may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. They also provide hygiene and personal care supplies.

In 2019, the Fire Department received a grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to fund Mental Health Awareness and Training. Under this grant, HEART Units team members developed and implemented specialized Mental Health First Aid Training that was delivered to all Fire Department staff, making Long Beach the first fire department in the nation to deliver such training. This training provided the entire

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department with greater insight regarding mental health issues, as well as recognizing signs and symptoms of mental disorders, employing crisis de-escalation techniques, and providing education on available community resources.

The ability of HEART Unit team members to establish trust among individuals experiencing homelessness has been critical to the delivery of services tailored to each person's situation. The following are just a few examples of how the HEART Units have connected people experiencing homelessness to our CoC partners:

- HEART Units connected an out-of-town family, displaced due to a tornado, with services and family care through Catholic Charities.
- HEART Units worked with a 65-year-old male undocumented person experiencing homelessness to place him in permanent housing in November 2019. In 2019, the Fire Department responded to over 40 calls for service for this individual. He had barriers of substance abuse, medical conditions, depression, and fear of deportation that kept him from accepting help. Eventually, he was placed into a skilled nursing facility that specializes in caring for undocumented residents.
- For the past several years, HEART Units have maintained contact with a veteran and his wife who were experiencing homelessness and were initially not willing to receive help. After the veteran suffered a stroke, his wife ultimately reached out to the HEART Team for help. HEART Team members were able to connect both of them with veterans' services, which coordinated medical services and housing for the couple.

The Proposed FY 21 Budget eliminates both Fire Department HEART Units and transfers program responsibilities to the Department of Health and Human Services, who will operate the program with Nurses and/or Social Workers. By all accounts, the HEART Units team has been a great success. However, when making significant reductions to balance the budget, it was important to focus on maintaining core services of fire suppression and emergency medical response. The elimination of the HEART Program in the Fire Department will result in the reassignment of four Firefighter/Paramedics to paramedic rescue ambulances. The Fire Department will work closely with the Department of Health and Human Services during the transition period.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (562) 570-2509.

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