

## **Connect & Protect: A Model Program by the Best and Brightest in Law Enforcement and Mental Health**

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At Cop2Cop we respond daily to offer assistance due to crises, violence, shootings and trauma impacting law enforcement officers and the communities they serve throughout New Jersey. In West Orange, New Jersey I was able to interview a team of law enforcement and mental health leaders who gave me hope that change is possible and that a caring community can make a difference. The current mental health epidemic and law enforcement community issues foster an environment of division, despair and dissention. Then a program like "Connect & Protect" is launched and developed to create the change we all need to see to be inspired. The West Orange Police Chief Jimmy Abbott, Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris CEO Robert Davison and Achille DeJean LPC, Connect & Protect Clinical Supervisors, candidly shared how they got to the point of connecting and protecting as a unified team.

The heart behind the Connect & Protect funding, awards, formal collaboration and agreements began with people who cared. The homeless were often in the same area of town in West Orange, struggling with mental illness and addiction challenges often, and rather than the routine pick-ups citations and arrests, a few good leaders said "How can we help together?" The series of events that followed have culminated in the successful launch maintenance and expansion of the innovative "Connect & Protect" Initiative based on the partnership of the West Orange Police Department and the Mental Health Association of Essex.

West Orange Police Chief James Abbott explained, "As for the most important aspects of the Connect & Protect program I would say the key points are not in any specific order. Our mission statement and core values are the very essence of this program. It offers an opportunity to work alongside and learn from clinical practitioners with a different perspective and expertise. It will reduce the likelihood of incarceration, injuries and deaths to both those afflicted and those responding which are often the unintended consequences of a law enforcement response culminating in an inappropriate handling of people with mental health disorders often exacerbated by substance dependency and homelessness."

WOPD has partnered with the Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris, an independent 501(c)(3) organization headquartered at 80 Main Street in West Orange across from the WOPD. It is nationally recognized for its leadership in mental health issues with Robert Davison serving as its Chief Executive Officer. Bob Davison explained during our interview, "When you have a police department interested in working with you—you jump on it."

The sentiment echoed repeatedly as I interviewed the leaders and people responsible today for this incredible program was simple. Both mental health and law enforcement professionals share a powerful bond, they both are in service and they both want to do the right thing. In 2020 shortly after the George Floyd murder the Connect & Protect team wanted to expand and interact better with residents and avoid force whenever possible and additional funding allowed a Connect & Protect staff member to be hired to expand the services. The Connect & Protect team added that they reviewed several hundreds hours of body cam footage related to officers and those impacted by mental illness and in those interactions it appeared that simple suggestions, and more time and training of officers as a follow up would continue to grow their effectiveness.

The "Connect & Protect" project funded by a Department of Justice Federal Grant for one million dollars originally seed money moved to hire the Co Responder staff/social workers for 16 hours a day 5 days a week in a 2021/2022 three year grant.

Today co-responders stationed out of WOPD CSU partnered with officers, radios, and dispatch all redirected workflows to a more formal allegiance for police and co-responders to come together with a common denominator of support as one unified team. By inserting Connect & Protect staff into roll calls, they had to earn the respect of the 911 dispatchers to be activated and now consistently whenever cops and 911 get on scene with any mental health issue the co-responder goal to de-escalate successfully is the focus.

The Connect & Protect Co-responder project supervisor Achille Dejean sat down with me to describe this unique and innovative partnership. "This work is important because it helps the community, especially those most vulnerable struggling with mental health related concerns. Our officers are highly skilled and trained to protect the community but that comes with high expectations. This partnership alleviates some of that pressure and allows for the joining of skill sets between officers and licensed mental health professionals. This ultimately results in the best possible response to mental health crisis in the community. What is most gratifying is being part of that joining of skill sets ... being part of the solution."

Some statistics about the Connect & Protect program this past fiscal year (July 2022—June 2023) include the following; MHA Co-Responded to 183 calls with WOPD. 92% of those calls were resolved (appropriately de-escalated or linked to an appropriate level of care) without incident, leaving just 8% of calls resulting in involuntary transports to the hospital for further evaluation. MHA provided 15 training events to officers this past year. Training focused on various mental

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health topics and included both video and face-to-face training. MHA completed 44 after-action reviews with WOPD. This is when they watch bodycam footage of calls that occurred overnight or over the weekend when the Co-response program is not operating. These incidents reviewed are incidents where force was used or the call resulted in involuntary transport to the hospital. Of the 44 incidents reviewed only 1 resulted in a recommendation.

**The History of the Connect & Protect Program**

In a 2017 article entitled "Unique Partnership Receives Statewide Recognition for Innovative Program" (Fagan & Ryan) the authors highlighted that the New Jersey Attorney General's Office announced that the West Orange Police Department was awarded the *Excellence in Policing: Community Partnership Award*. The award honored a partnership that strengthens relationships and collaborates with community stakeholders to advance public safety. This prestigious recognition was presented to the WOPD for implementing a ground-breaking program where trained mental health clinicians were called upon to respond alongside officers on certain mental health crisis calls. The police department's partnership with the Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris, Inc. (MHAEM) was an innovative approach to better serve the community in cases of non-criminal crises.

Through the development of a collaborative professional relationship between WOPD and MHAEM, police officers have had the opportunity to increase their success rate for appropriate disposition and interaction with calls that may be related to mental health issues.

West Orange Police Chief James Abbott explained in the article how the program conforms to the mission of community policing, "Our police department is constantly open to the implementation of new and different programs...especially those types that reflect our ongoing commitment to find improved methods in keeping all our residents safe. Our goal has always been to de-escalate situations with new initiatives focusing on unnecessary force. Our participation in this collaborative effort holds promise for bringing us closer toward our objective."

Captain Richard McDonald pointed out, "In addition to in-person responses, trained clinicians review officer's body cams and go over all the calls to address any areas that might need improvement."

The partnership between the WOPD and MHAEM has helped prioritize appropriate response techniques and advocate for treatment over incarceration whenever appropriate. The WOPD is the sole nationally accredited law enforcement entity in all of Essex County. Accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA), the gold standard in law enforcement which requires all accredited agencies to promote and abide by the most contemporary best practices in the industry.

Chief Abbott cited the extensive degree of community collaboration that allowed this trail-blazing partnership to come to fruition. "West Orange Township Attorney Richard Trenk was the first to recommend working with MHAEM, based on his prior knowledge of the agency's work in the community. Essex County Prosecutor Ted Stevens was critical in advancing the initiative for specifically granting the ability of MHAEM staff to review body camera footage. It was, within or at, his sole discretion to permit the practice which otherwise is prohibited by the New Jersey Attorney General. The approval and support of Mayor Robert Parisi and the Township Council were also essential to the process.

According to Davison, "This partnership is something that just makes sense and, in my opinion, should be looked at as a model for municipalities throughout New Jersey and beyond. "Law enforcement professionals are exactly that ... they are outstanding public servants but they are not social workers and should not be expected to fulfill that role, although all too often they are."

"Working together, MHAEM provides the West Orange officers with resources, referrals and trained staff to de-escalate situations and help determine the best course of action for everyone involved. Through this partnership, law enforcement professionals receive support ... mental health professionals get the opportunity to provide much needed services and, most importantly, individuals dealing with mental or behavioral health issues can get the help they may need as opposed to becoming a part of the criminal justice system," Davison said.

**Summary**

The Connect & Protect program fosters peace, partnership, compassion, and mutual aid in a collaboration solely focused on cooperation for those most in need in our communities.

Albert Einstein explains, "Every kind of peaceful cooperation among men is primarily based on mutual trust and only secondarily on institutions such as courts of justice and police." Connect & Protect has answered the call. Now I am calling all law enforcement leaders and mental health professionals to trust each other more for the greater good. Let's all CONNECT & PROTECT.