

Harm reduction is the focus of a new public safety program

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Friday, 24 December 2021 04:56

Please join us in kicking off our new Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program.

LEAD is a prearrest diversion, rooted in harm reduction, in which police officers divert individuals to intensive case management in lieu of arrest for low level nonviolent crimes driven by substance use disorder and other unmet behavioral health needs.



The new program is known as 'LEAD'

The Gallup Police Department has started a new program that tackles low-level, non-violent crimes like shoplifting, loitering, and trespassing.

The department kicked off the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program on Nov. 16. LEAD is a pre-arrest diversion program rooted in harm reduction.

Nicole Lujan, the project coordinator for LEAD, explained how it works. After an officer makes an arrest, they can refer the person to the program. The project's case manager Vaughn Awelgate then meets with the individual. Awelgate tries to help them by getting them the resources they need. The hope is that with resources, the crimes will stop. The program is designed for people 18 and over.

"We're actually working with them through the process," Awelgate explained. "For example, say an individual requests services for detox or in-patient treatment, then we tap into the resources that are available for them."

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Gallup Police Captain Erin Toadlena-Pablo said the program is something new for the Department.

“This is something that is new that is at a level where an officer has that decision to reach out to Vaughn, reach out to Nicole and say ‘hey, how can we help this person?’” Toadlena-Pablo said.

She noted that in the past these things were handled by the court system following an arrest.

“All of us are treading new water right now, and we just want to make sure we get more information out there as far as ‘hey this is what we have,’” Toadlena-Pablo said.

When asked if the program was meant to support abstinence from drugs or alcohol, Lujan said that abstinence is not something they expect from the people they work with.

“We are a program that meets clients where they’re at, so we don’t have the expectation of abstinence,” Lujan explained. “We know that our clients are usually in a full substance use disorder and we’re just working with them [on] the little things that could help them get away from that.”

So far, no one has taken advantage of the program. Lujan said they did have one referral, but it wound up not being the right fit for the person.

“It’s not going to be a program for everyone, but we want to have more resources out there for the officer to utilize instead of just ‘ok, I’m going to take this person to jail’ or ‘ok, I’m going to do the summons’ ... because there [are] people who make mistakes out there,” Toadlena-Pablo said.

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