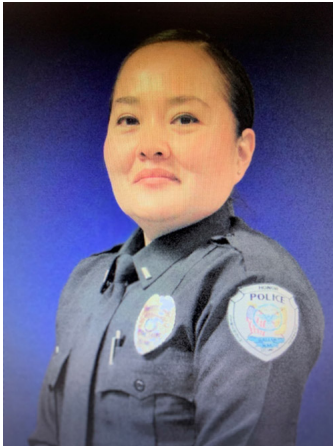


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Taking the LEAD

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Even in a small, tight-knit town, it's easy for people facing setbacks to fall through the cracks. Gallup has been quietly introducing harm reduction strategies as part of a more compassionate approach to the safety net.

Part of that is the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program, started last November to help police refer non-criminals to social services in the hope of keeping them from becoming criminals or victims. LEAD bridges police services with behavioral health management.

"The goal is to keep them out of the system," Behavioral Health Manager Debra L. Martinez said.

It starts with a call from an officer, usually in the field, to a case manager. Calls are entirely at the officer's discretion, and usually involve low-level complaints like trespassing or panhandling. Officers may choose to offer a referral instead of arrest, or may make a "social referral" where there's no arrest pending.

That's when case managers like Nicole Lujan spring into action. "When an officer contacts the case manager, they will meet in the field with a client," she said. "It's called a warm handoff."

The decision whether or not to participate is always up to the client. The client can explain their needs and what they're trying to accomplish. The case manager will explain what is available and what is expected.

"The case manager will come out and explain how the process will work and what will help in the situation. We want this individual to take ownership of the process," Lujan said.

Services might be as simple as a bus pass or clothing to help someone get and commute to a job.

"We don't tell them, 'you need a job.' One of the clients, he didn't even worry about housing, he

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just wanted to get back into school. We let them guide where they are going to go, just to build that trust,” Martinez said.

The goal is to stay in touch with clients to ensure they have what they need to improve their own lives. Because of that, the program is designed for residents of Gallup and the immediate surrounding area.

In some cases “resident” is a loose definition. Some of the clients are homeless, and for a subset of those it’s a choice, Martinez said: “Not all of our clients that are experiencing homelessness want to be sheltered.”

Sometimes the job is helping clients navigate bureaucracy, like getting ID and work documents, or help getting work or services.

Even for people with stable lives, “it’s hard to get a driver’s license,” Martinez said. “Imagine someone who is working on their recovery, been on the streets – not getting frustrated with the process at MVD – getting documents and time scheduling appointments can be difficult, even for people not experiencing homelessness.”

LEAD case managers also accommodate loose client schedules.

“Our harm reduction approach, meeting the clients where they are at – we know it’s going to be hard to set up an appointment with them for Tuesday at two o’clock....They might show up a little later, or a little earlier, or the next day,” Lujan said. “We’re meeting them where they are at. We’ll continue to seek them out to assist them.”

The grant that funds LEAD allows for a “flex fund” that leaves a small amount of cash for spot necessities.

“Usually grant programs don’t allow for those flex funds, even to get somebody’s driver’s license

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or ID, or even a meal for someone who hasn't eaten a meal in weeks," Martinez said. "A lot of our clients are living on the streets, so just getting the basic needs met is the priority. We think, 'What would we need? School, car, a job or a house?' That's not some of the things that come up."

So far, eight officers have connected people to services through LEAD, including a dozen social referrals. That's good because one of the challenges in other communities has been getting police on board with a program that may seem out of their lane, Lujan said.

"We're still trying to get a buy-in from our officers, they are still new to the program and they are still trying to test the water. We're trying to get our name out there," Gallup Police Patrol Captain Erin Toadlena-Pablo said. "It was a long process to see how this program was going to be a fit for our area. It was a lot of stakeholders."

Since it started, about 40 people in the community have trained on the program, including police, case managers, health workers, judges and others who frequently cross paths with hardship cases.

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