North East Independent School District

8961 TESORO DRIVE – SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217

Office of the
Superintendent

To: Select Committee on Mass Violence Prevention & Community Safety

From: Dr. Sean Maika, Superintendent, North East ISD

Subject: Duty #4 Submission

North East ISD in San Antonio prioritizes the mental health of our staff, students and families as an important part of our work. As part of Duty #4, North East ISD would like the Select Committee to review the Handle With Care program and the San Antonio Police Department Mental Health Unit. Both should be considered for replication across the state.

The Handle With Care program is a partnership between SAPD and school districts. North East ISD helped to pilot the program in 2019, and it has since been implemented in all districts in the San Antonio area. When SAPD responds to a call involving a school-age child, officers send a confidential notification that alerts school staff to "handle the student with care" because the child was involved in a traumatic event. There are no details of the incident released. The message "Handle with Care" puts school staff on notice to be sensitive to the child's needs. It gives staff a "heads up" that a child may be in a mental health crisis or in need of extra support. The Handle With Care program processed close to 550 reports in the 2019-2020 school year. Please watch a Salud America! story about Handle With Care at https://bit.ly/2Qd1RIF.

The SAPD Mental Health Unit provides immediate contact support to individuals who are experiencing a mental health crisis or an undiagnosed severe mental illness. The unit includes 10 officers, two detectives, a supervisor and three clinicians who help to deescalate mental health crises and connect people with the mental health services they need. Once making contact and assessing, the officers make additional frequent contacts to allow for possible emergency detention, placement at the state hospital, and treatment to help individuals reintegrate back to their home with support. This SAPD program has received the 2017 Baptist Health Foundation's Spirit of Health award and been featured in a documentary "Ernie & Joe."

The need for specially trained police officers to address mental health calls is an ongoing and longterm workforce need of the state. The SAPD Mental Health Unit is understaffed for the volume of mental health crises and 911 calls made in our city. It also does not currently handle juvenile cases. Training and expansion of this program to include juveniles would support the Behavior Threat Assessment mandates in our schools as well as our opportunities to bring awareness to our Trauma-informed Care mandates.

Enclosed is an article from the *San Antonio Express-News* about the SAPD Mental Health Unit.

San Antonio cops to be featured in HBO documentary ‘Ernie & Joe’

Richard A. Marini Nov. 1, 2019 Updated: Nov. 5, 2019 7:43 a.m.

There’s not a single gun battle, car chase or drop of blood to be seen in “Ernie & Joe.” But the documentary about two members of the San Antonio Police Department is as gripping as any gritty cop drama on TV.

Filmed over 2½ years, the film premieres at 9 p.m. Nov. 19 on HBO. It follows Ernie Stevens and Joe Smarro, partners in the SAPD’s Mental Health Unit, which responds to police calls involving someone in a mental health crisis.

The unit was founded in 2008, back when the attitude toward the mentally ill in most police departments was best described as “cuff ’em and stuff ’em.” In other words, restrain them so they can’t hurt anyone and take them off to jail.

“The saying fosters a criminalization of the mentally ill,” said Gilbert R. Gonzales, director of the Bexar County Department of Behavioral Health, who was involved in the establishment of the unit. “Today the message is ‘recovery is possible.’”

While San Antonio was one of the first police departments to establish a mental health unit, many others have since followed suit. But what still sets it apart, Smarro said, is how the detail collaborates throughout the community.

“We work with the fire department, EMS, the city’s behavioral health department and the hospitals and treatment centers,” he said. “That helps us bridge the gaps where people can fall through the cracks in the system.”

San Antonio also is unusual because Police Chief William McManus mandated early on that every member of the force, starting with new cadets at the academy, complete a 40-hour crisis intervention training course. During the weeklong class, officers learn to recognize, identify and de-escalate situations in which someone with a mental illness is at risk to themselves and others while also providing the best, least restrictive and most appropriate treatment options — options that almost never include jail time.

As the documentary makes clear, training is vital for today’s police officers. One in five Americans has a mental health diagnoses, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and between 25 percent and 30 percent of all police calls involve someone in crisis. In San Antonio, that adds up to about 28,000 calls every year.

Director Jenifer McShane said she decided to make the film after visiting San Antonio and going on a ride-along with Stevens and Smarro.

“I was struck by how well they do what they do,” she said. “We can certainly identify the problem of mental illness and the criminal justice system. But we don’t talk enough about solutions. What’s happening in San Antonio may be part of that solution.”

The 97-minute documentary follows Stevens and Smarro as they patrol the streets of San Antonio, responding to calls throughout the city. Often they arrive after uniformed officers, already on the scene, have determined that the problem requires their special skills.

In one long, tense scene, a woman who says her name is Kendra sits on the railing of a bridge over Loop 410, threatening to jump. Rather than aggressively confronting her or rushing to pull her away from the railing, the pair approach slowly, cautiously, speaking quietly as traffic roars below.

At one point, Stevens actually sits down on the curb, a submissive position intended to alleviate Kendra’s obvious fear of the police. Earlier in the film, Stevens explained that he and Smarro have been criticized for sitting because it’s “poor tactically.”

“But I’m not going to stand over someone and talk down at them,” he said. “I’m going to get down at their level because they’re going to tell me a lot more that way.”

It’s all about gaining the person’s trust. During this call, the two ask Kendra for permission every time they do something new — standing up, moving closer, shaking her hand and finally, after much talk and more listening, escorting her to their car so they can take her somewhere safe, somewhere that she can be treated..

The documentary also humanizes Stevens and Smarro and, by extension, the other police officers on the force by following them during their off hours.

Smarro plays soccer and teaches himself to paint while Stevens goes to church with his wife and does homework alongside his daughter as he studies to get a degree in criminal justice.

The documentary doesn’t paint too rosy a picture of the unit’s work. When Stevens and Smarro, along with a social worker, follow up on Kendra six weeks after the bridge incident, she appears healthy and optimistic, happy to talk about her new job as a waitress. Then, several weeks later, she falls off their radar after being evicted from her apartment after a series of fights with her boyfriend.

When they finally track her down at a new apartment, she seems more subdued, less convincingly happy.

Stevens and Smarro attempt to encourage her, explaining that they’re there to help but that they don’t want to have to track her down again and again.

Afterward, in the parking lot, Smarro blurts out, “I don’t buy it,” referring to her claims that she’s fine and doing well.

For Stevens and Smarro, police work often involves little more than listening. For many of the people they encounter, they might be the first people who actually listen to them in days, or even weeks.

“As police officers you want to take control of the situation, try to fix the issue,” Stevens said. “But people aren’t the ones who are broken, it’s the situation that is causing the problem.”

For example, he said, most people who are suicidal don’t want to end their life, they only want to end their pain.

Stevens was one of the first two officers assigned to the Mental Health Unit. It was not an obvious career path for him — he said he hated going out on mental health calls.

“I didn’t know how to handle them,” he said. “There was no training when I came through the academy. I didn’t even know how to recognize what a mental health crisis looked like.”

The only reason he took the new, weeklong crisis intervention training was because another officer signed him up without him knowing.

“The only good thing was the class was held on a Monday through Friday, so it gave me a weekend off to be with my family,” he said.

Then on the fifth day of class a woman brought in to address the trainees talked about how her son has a mental illness and she’s terrified that if she ever called the police it would cost him his life.

“That really touched my heart,” he said. “It changed the entire career path that I was on.”

Smarro joined the unit in 2009, in part because he’d been what he called a mental health “consumer” since he was 7 years old.

“I grew up suffering a life of childhood trauma and sexual abuse,” he said. “I’ve been in and out of therapy since I was 8 and still am. I’m a combat veteran, a Marine, who has a diagnosis of PTSD and depression.”

From his time on patrol, he realized that he was more willing to talk and connect with people on a deeper level than perhaps many of his colleagues, a skill necessary for the unit.

The Mental Health Unit has since grown to include 10 officers, two detectives, a supervisor and three clinicians.

The San Antonio program is a model for police departments across the country, said Mark Stoeltje, executive director of the San Antonio Clubhouse, a mental health recovery program for adults.

“Other cities are doing similar things, but when the program began it was pretty innovative,” Stoeltje said.

Stoeltje, the husband of Express-News reporter Melissa Stoeltje, saw the benefits of crisis intervention training firsthand one day when a Clubhouse member had a psychotic episode. Responding to his 911 call, two patrol officers handcuffed the member and were about to take him to jail when two cops who had gone through the training arrived. After speaking to him for several minutes, they had him uncuffed and took him to a hospital instead.

“Without the CIT training, the situation could have ended very differently,” Stoeltje said.

Prior to its HBO premier, “Ernie & Joe” has been screened at more than two dozen film festivals, winning a Special Jury Recognition for Empathy in Craft at South by Southwest this year in Austin and an Audience Award at the San Antonio Film Festival in August.

Reviews have been mostly positive. Both Variety and The Hollywood Reporter named it one of the best movies at the 2019 SXSW Film Festival.

While Stevens and Smarro are no longer day-to-day partners — Smarro has taken the lead in an officer resiliency and wellness program, helping his fellow cops deal with the stresses of the job, while Stevens is in a program that targets those the unit interacts with the most — they’re both curious to see the reaction the documentary receives.

“It’ll be interesting to see how it all plays out,” Stevens said. “We hope it’ll inspire people to find out what’s happening in their community and hopefully agitate for their police department to work to handle mental health calls more humanely and compassionately.”

Richard A. Marini is a features writer in the San Antonio and Bexar County area. Read him on our free site, mySA.com, and on our subscriber site, ExpressNews.com. | rmarini@express-news.net | Twitter: @RichardMarini