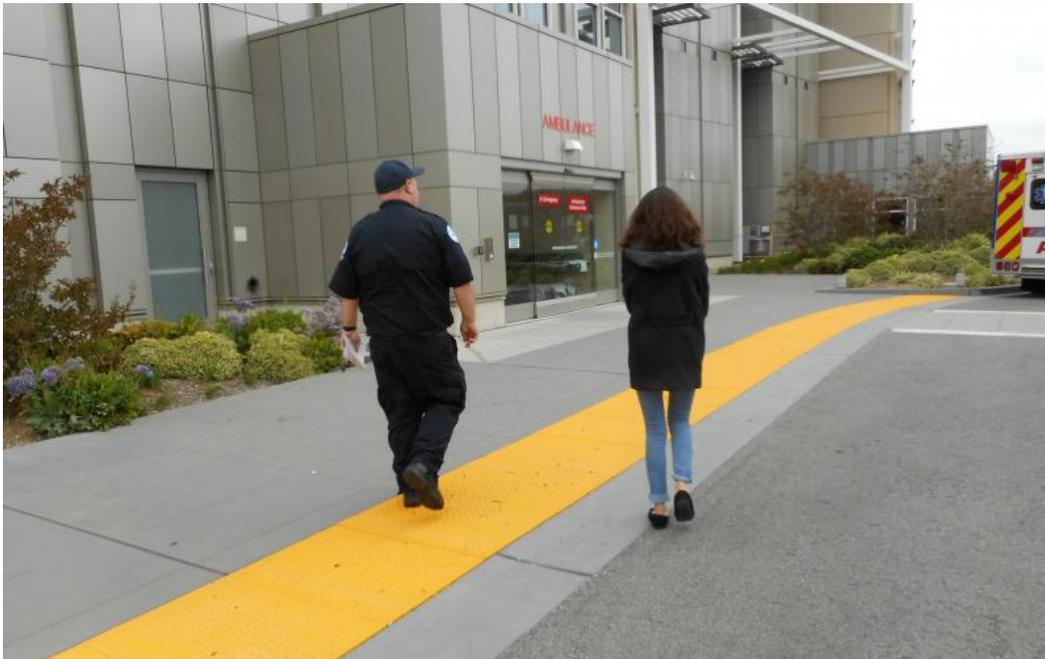


# During a Mental Health Crisis, Making the SMART Call



*Will McClurg, a paramedic with training in mental health, escorts a 16-year-old girl in to Peninsula Hospital where she will undergo a psychiatric evaluation. Her parents had discovered disturbing videos about suicide ideation.*

On a drizzly Tuesday afternoon, a teenage girl stood in a Daly City driveway dabbing at tears in her eyes. Her parents had called 9-1-1 because they didn't know where else to turn. They had discovered disturbing videos on social media of their daughter and her friends talking about drug use and suicide. Just four days earlier she had celebrated her 16th birthday.

Now she looked scared and confused, not knowing what would happen next, in fuzzy slippers and a black coat she wore tight like a security blanket.

Two police officers who arrived decided she posed a danger to herself and needed to undergo a mental health evaluation at a hospital with psychiatric emergency services.

But climbing into the back of a patrol car or a bright red ambulance in front of your home draws a lot of unwanted attention and carries a powerful stigma, especially for a fragile adolescent. For all the neighbors knew, the police were simply taking a routine report or were returning lost items. Nothing much to see here.

Instead of escalating the scene, the officers called for the San Mateo County Mental Health Assessment and Referral Team, or SMART.

The SMART program is seen as a less expensive and more effective and humane way to care for patients exhibiting signs of mental illness or undergoing a crisis. When law enforcement officers request a SMART unit and one is available, a paramedic from [American Medical Response](#) (AMR) with special training in mental health and crisis intervention techniques arrives in either a van or SUV. No flashing lights, no sirens.

## *1 in 25 adults experiences a serious mental illness in a given year*

Paramedics in the SMART program, freed from the need to rush patients to a hospital and get back in service as quickly as possible, can interview family members or friends of the patient, contact a patient's therapist and conduct an assessment to determine the best course of action for the patient, said Will McClurg, an AMR paramedic and a veteran SMART responder. Patients -- who sit up in the backseat rather than lie down on stretchers -- can be taken to a therapist's office, a treatment program or even their own home.

The goal is to avoid, if possible, sending patients directly to [costly and overcrowded emergency rooms](#).

"Many people undergoing a mental health crisis do not need to be rushed to the emergency room," McClurg said. "While we are doing what's best for the patient, we are also freeing up a regular ambulance that would otherwise be needed to transport a mental health patient."

AMR, which operates countywide ambulance service under contract with the [County of San Mateo](#), staffs SMART with two 12-hour shifts seven days a week. One unit is on duty from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and the second is on duty from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

## *9.9% of calls for emergency medical services are for behavioral/psychiatric needs*

The SMART program began in 2005 with one unit. Due to the program's success and at the request of law enforcement, AMR began staffing SMART with two units in 2015 with additional funding from a variety of sources including [Measure K](#), a half-cent countywide sales tax approved by voters.

Unlike regular ambulance service, transportation in a SMART car is free of charge. Dispatch of a SMART car can only be made through the County's Public Safety Dispatch Center at the request of law enforcement.

Expanding SMART is part of an overall strategy to improve the [mental health system of care for adults](#) in San Mateo County. That effort also includes providing [additional resources](#) for mentally ill adults booked into jail for non-violent and minor offenses and building a respite center where people with a mental illness can stay for a short period of time to stabilize and enter long-term treatment.

QUOTE FROM BOARD MEMBER



*Will McClurg speaks privately with a patient to help determine services that will meet her needs.*

Expanding SMART recognizes the growing role law enforcement and emergency medical services play in mental health. The [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) estimates that nearly 15 percent of men and 30 percent of women booked into jails have a serious mental health condition. The frequent interactions between police and the mentally ill can lead to volatile situations.

In response, nearly 500 law enforcement officers in San Mateo County have undergone [Crisis Intervention Training](#), or CIT, a 40-hour course that teaches officers how to recognize types of mental illness, calm people in the throes of a crisis and take other actions that can prevent suicide, for instance.

*Suicide is the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the U.S. For ages 15 to 24, it is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death*

Jim Coffman, a San Mateo County Sheriff's Deputy who until recently overaw CIT, said one of the most valuable aspects of the training is showing officers the services and resources available by introducing them to service providers from the health care, substance use and counseling communities. He said a goal of the Sheriff's Office is to require all deputies to undergo the CIT course.

"CIT is not magic, but it does give officers in the field a greater understanding of how to calmly handle stressful situations," Coffman said. "It's another tool at their disposal."

The County's Behavioral Health and Recovery Services, meanwhile, is working to open the respite center for people undergoing a mental health crisis. To be called Serenity House, the facility will give law enforcement and SMART paramedics an added option.



*Graduates from a recent 40-hour Crisis Intervention Training.*

McClurg, the SMART paramedic (it's an ongoing joke over who's "SMART" on any given shift), sees his role as the first step in helping patients find longer-term solutions. "There are so many reasons people feel the way they do and act the way they do," he said. "It's never-ending and it's challenging."

On a recent 12-hour shift, the call came over the radio: "Nine-year-old male. Danger to self."

After a short drive, McClurg pulled up in front of an East Palo Alto elementary school. A boy in a white polo shirt and tan pants sat at a table eating a snack.

Over the weekend his mother had taken away his video game console. School officials called authorities after the boy told several people that he planned to jump into traffic to kill himself if she didn't return it. McClurg asked the boy a series of questions before taking him to see a mental health professional. He was released later that day with referrals to ongoing mental health resources.

## *Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by the age of 14*

Later that day, McClurg responded to a trailer park in South San Francisco where a 74-year-old man had learned he was going to be evicted. The man, who said he had lived in the park since 1972, threatened to kill himself if he was forced to leave. Police had just removed a firearm from the man's home when McClurg pulled up. The man, after being taken by McClurg to a hospital, was admitted for observation and evaluated for further services, such as relocation to family.

And in Daly City, McClurg talked with police, the girl's parents and the 16-year-old herself. He slowly escorted the girl into the backseat of his white SUV with heavily tinted windows "like a celebrity," he told her, before driving her to an emergency room with psychiatric emergency services.

"An ambulance draws a lot of attention and isn't necessary," he said. "What she needs is a quiet ride to see people who can start giving her the care she needs."

She was admitted for further treatment.

### **Sidebars with Additional Information:**

#### **What to say when calling 9-1-1**

If a family member or friend is in a mental health crisis, steps can be taken to help ensure everyone's safety.

Learn what do do:

- Before calling 9-1-1
- During the call
- When police arrives

- And what to say when calling 9-1-1  
Learn more at [www.smchealth.org/mh911](http://www.smchealth.org/mh911)

## **24-Hour Crisis Lines**

Suicide/Crisis Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

San Mateo Medical Center Psychiatric Emergency Services: 650-573-2662

Mills-Peninsula Medical Center Psychiatric Emergency Services: 650-696-5915