

# B.C.'s first civilian-led mobile mental health crisis team expanding to 2 more municipalities

In the 6 months since the program's launch on the North Shore, the team has responded to over 270 calls

Isabelle Raghem · CBC News · Posted: May 04, 2022 5:00 AM PDT | Last Updated: May 4, 2022



Sean Daoust, a peer support worker with PACT speaks to North Shore residents at Lynn Valley Library to raise awareness of the presence of B.C.'s first civilian-led crisis team in the region. (Mahshid Hadi/CBC)

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B.C.'s first civilian-led mobile crisis team which launched in November to assist police responding to mental health calls on the North Shore is expanding to two more B.C. municipalities.

When the Peer Assisted Care Team (PACT) is called, a mental health worker and a peer support worker are dispatched to assist, providing crisis counselling, resources, and if needed or wanted, accompanying a person to the hospital.

There are no branded vehicles. No sirens. No uniforms. That's intentional to keep the interaction discreet and provide privacy to the person or people in need.

"Whereas, if you call 911 you might have one, two, three police cars that show up to the scenes. And there's obviously gonna be more than one officer and sometimes it draws a lot of attention," said Sean Doust, a PACT peer worker.

- [Advocates call for community-led crisis intervention, not police](#)

"Knowing that if I'm in a crisis situation, I don't need to rush to emergency. I don't need to call 911. That there is another option and that a care team can come de-escalate the situation, get me through that day and then find what I need going forward."

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) North and West Vancouver says the pilot program is B.C.'s first civilian-led crisis team to provide an alternative or auxiliary service to a police response related to mental health.

"I do think we would be able to meet people in a more immediate way if we were integrated into 911," said Julia Kaisla, the executive director for CMHA North and West Vancouver Branch, who hopes to see the pilot program evolving and expanding in the years to come.



Sean Daoust, a PACT peer support worker with the Canadian Mental Health Association North and West Vancouver branch, says the service provides an alternative to calling 911 or going to the hospital. (Mahshid Hadi/CBC)

The program's creation follows incidents involving the use of force by police during wellness checks.

In August 2019, Kyaw Naing Maung, was off his schizophrenia medication, when he was [shot three times in his bedroom](#) and killed by Ridge Meadows RCMP trying to apprehend him under the Mental Health Act. His sister had called 911 to ask that he be taken to hospital to restart his medication

- [Approach mental health crises with care, not policing: crisis worker](#)

Currently, calls are being taken Thursday to Sunday, from 6 pm-midnight in English and Farsi. North Shore community members can call 1-888-261-7228 or text 778-839-1831.

In the six months since the launch, the team has responded to over 270 calls.

"A lot of the calls we've had has resulted in less 911 calls. So that's a success," said Daoust.

## Launching in New Westminster & Victoria

The provincial government announced in April it's providing [\\$1.26M through Budget 2022](#) to expand PACT on the North Shore and to see branches created in New Westminister and Victoria later this year.

"Crisis situations that are met with community-based care prevent the criminalization of our communities' most vulnerable people," said Sheila Malcolmson, the minister of mental health and addictions, in a statement. "These new peer-assisted care teams will support people in distress and connect them to the services they need, while freeing up valuable police resources."

The Mental Health and Addictions Ministry, in a statement, also pointed to the [CAHOOTS community-based crisis-intervention](#) team in Eugene, Ore., as a reference, saying "it averts approximately \$8.5 million in policing costs annually and answers 17 per cent of police calls".

## Concerns over police involvement

Meenakshi Manno, a campaigner with Pivot Legal Society, said while the program has promise, she is deeply concerned that police are involved in the program's development and, at times, officers are being dispatched by the team.

"It's not actually fully removing resources from policing. It's an auxiliary policing program."



Meenakshi Manno, a criminalization and policing campaigner with Vancouver-based Pivot Legal Society, says we need to look at the entire mental health system and how the system is failing people, up to and including the moment police attend their home for a wellness check. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

She fears police intervention in mental health crises too often leads to people being funnelled into the criminal justice system.

"A lot of people who've experienced trauma or have had previous experiences with the police, that uniformed officer armed, is already a trigger. If you add criminalization, being racialized, being black or Indigenous, it's really a recipe for disaster."

Instead, she suggests diverting police funds to community grassroots initiatives that respond to mental health crises and that can also provide support to people who use drugs, pointing to the link between the drug crisis and the need for better mental health responses.