



Office of the City Manager

April 22, 2025

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council  
From: Paul Buddenhagen, City Manager  
Re: Specialized Care Unit

### **Introduction**

In an effort to best serve Berkeley residents needing mental health crisis support, the City is transitioning the services offered by the pilot Specialized Care Unit (SCU) project to Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services. This transition, which is expected to be completed by late summer 2025, is made possible by significant changes to the state's policy landscape for mental and behavioral health mobile crisis programs.

### **Rationale**

As of January 1, 2023, California counties were mandated to implement a new Medi-Cal Community-Based Mobile Crisis Intervention Services benefit. This new Medi-Cal benefit aligns closely with the SCU's goals:

- Crisis hotline via a single telephone number.
- Standardized dispatch and response procedures.
- Response for urban areas required within 60 minutes.
- Reduction of unnecessary emergency department and psychiatric inpatient hospitalizations.
- Minimization of unnecessary law enforcement involvement.
- Provision of multidisciplinary care, including EMTs, licensed clinicians, and peer support specialists. State requirement to serve all residents regardless of insurance or ability to pay.

In addition, several operational requirements for mobile crisis teams address several issues of concern by community stakeholders and are more feasibly implemented at the County level, including:

- 24/7 crisis hotline availability.
- Coordination with 988, 911, and other behavioral health providers for dispatch and on-site coordination.
- Coordination with emergency responders for transport to higher levels of care.
- Mandated 72-hour follow-up check-ins.

These requirements have proven challenging for the SCU to meet within its current funding and infrastructure. Currently, the County utilizes 911 for mobile crisis service contact and dispatch.

The County's existing system-wide coordination offers advantages for Berkeley residents, streamlining what would otherwise require extensive City-County coordination and infrastructure development to meet new Medi-Cal billing requirements. Moreover, the SCU's current contractor also provides behavioral health crisis services through Alameda County, facilitating a smoother transition and continuity of care for individuals receiving services.

### **Pilot Summary**

The Specialized Care Unit (SCU) pilot project was launched as part of the City's Reimagining Public Safety initiative to attempt to create a model for providing non-police responses for people having mental health crises and substance use emergencies. While the SCU has been operational since September 5, 2023, significant structural challenges have raised concerns about its sustainability. Key issues include:

- Staffing shortages;
- Hours of operation;
- Long response times;
- Lack of long-term funding;
- Calls are not routed through 911; and
- Unmet community expectations related to support for people who are homeless

Issues with the SCU are exacerbated by the pilot design. An evaluation by Research Development Associates (RDA) is underway that is expected to confirm systemic design flaws that hinder the SCU's long-term viability.

One example under the current structure is response times. With only one team, if a call for assistance comes in when the SCU is working on a different call, it could take several hours to respond. Stakeholders have been clear that this does not meet the expectations of the community.

Additionally, community concerns, operational inefficiencies, and strained relationships with key stakeholders due to misaligned performance expectations have further complicated implementation.

Moving forward, the City will work diligently to support the transition of the SCU to the County, collaborating with stakeholders to address unmet expectations, and ensuring continued service availability for Berkeley residents.

### **SCU Financial Sustainability Planning**

The SCU was initially funded by a combination of one-time ARPA funds, a state grant and Mental Health Service Act funding. Short-term funding creates great difficulty in sustaining a long-term program, which is one of the reasons the city is working to ensure that the service will continue to be available by transitioning it to the Alameda County. Ongoing Medi-Cal funding can be secured for the SCU if it is part of County services.

Since the SCU's original design and initial launch in 2023, the California policy landscape for mental and behavioral health mobile crisis programs has undergone significant changes. State efforts to enhance mental health crisis response have been integrated into new state requirements for counties under the CalAIM initiative (California Advancing & Innovating Medi-Cal). The mobile crisis services provided by the SCU pilot are now a Medi-Cal entitlement, with Alameda County Behavioral Health responsible for ensuring service availability to all county residents, including those in Berkeley. City staff have consulted with County Behavioral Health Officials, who fully support this determination. The County is currently developing ten teams to meet the mandated 60-minute response time for mobile crisis services throughout the county.

### **Program Needs & Financial Constraints**

Total one-time funding of \$5.3 million for the two-year SCU Pilot project has been provided by three funding streams summarized below.

- \$536,500 from the Crisis Care Mobile Units (CCMU) program grant from the California Department of Healthcare Services (DHCS) which expires on June 30, 2025. This grant will be fully expended.
- \$68,000 from the Behavioral Health Service Act, referred to as Mental Health Services Act funding prior to voter approval of Proposition 1. This funding will be fully expended.
- \$4,750,000 from The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant, which must be spent by December 31, 2026.

There is no reoccurring funding for the pilot once the resources listed above have been exhausted. Preliminary findings from the evaluation of the SCU that is currently underway indicate a substantial need for program infrastructure expansion, an increase in the number of teams, the need for standardized policies and protocols, upgrading the data system, and enhancing collaboration with Alameda County Behavioral Health's continuum of care including City emergency responders. There is also an urgent need to improve staff retention, potentially through program expansion with additional mobile teams, dedicated call-takers, and hazard pay or shift differentials for overnight and weekend shifts.

Given the City of Berkeley's limited resources and the discontinuation of current state and federal funding sources, the city is collaborating closely with Alameda County to ensure the continuity of mobile crisis services mandated under Cal-AIM reform.

### **Transition Planning**

Next steps to facilitate the transition include:

- Sharing evaluation findings with all stakeholders and Alameda County Behavioral Health to inform their program design and evaluation.
- Clarifying cost projections for the SCU Pilot as the program transitions to the County.
- Continuing proactive collaboration with the County and Bonita House to support the transition.
- Promoting the continued availability of SCU services throughout the transition.
- Facilitating coordination between Alameda County Behavioral Health, Berkeley Police, Fire, Mental Health Departments, and other stakeholders.
- The City will monitor service delivery quality, participate in stakeholder convenings, and ensure alignment with Reimagining Public Safety goals, even after Alameda County assumes operational responsibility.
- Developing community and stakeholder communication plans.

While the County assumes primary responsibility for much of the transition, the City of Berkeley will be actively engaged in ensuring uninterrupted service delivery to Berkeley residents. In addition, in line with the Reimagining Public Safety initiative, the City's Health, Housing and Community Services Department will use the evaluation results to guide the development, and implementation of alternatives to arrest and incarceration for individuals with behavioral health issues. While service delivery is transitioning, the City remains committed to investing in non-police crisis response solutions that uphold the principles of equity, care, and public safety. Additional updates will be as the timeline is solidified and communication plans are clear.

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