

# City of Poulsbo

*Housing, Health and Human Services Department*

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **For Immediate Release**

Date: November 9, 2020

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### **Title: County Commissioners Approve Funding for County's First Fire CARES Unit**

The Kitsap County Commissioners approved funding, today, to start a Fire CARES (Community Assistance, Referral, and Education Service) program that will operate from the Poulsbo Fire Department. Fire CARES is a partnership between Poulsbo Fire and the City of Poulsbo that will provide in home, mobile services to individuals struggling with mental illness, mental health distress, substance use, and other behavioral health issues. "This is a significant step forward for the City of Poulsbo and Kitsap County," says Poulsbo Fire Chief Jim Gillard.

The CARES program will provide assistance and referral services to people at risk of crisis. The intent is to prevent medical emergencies and break the cycle of reliance on emergency medical services and law enforcement for people experiencing behavioral health symptoms. According to Chief Gillard, "This program is not only about efficiency and maintaining services levels, it is about getting the right services to our most vulnerable citizens and ultimately to save lives."

Fire CARES is a proven model encouraged by the Washington State Legislature (RCW 35.21.930) that improves outcomes, reduces costs, and helps individuals who have difficulty accessing behavioral health services. "Cities across the country are looking for a new response to behavioral health related calls," says Poulsbo Mayor Becky Erickson. "This is the next, logical step to complement our police navigator program. A CARES Unit will bring medical services and mental health expertise into the field and build on the excellent work already being done by the Poulsbo Navigator."

According to Kim Hendrickson, the City's Director of Housing Health and Human Services, "this is exactly the right time to work with our fire department to bring behavioral health assistance into the field. It is hard for people to access care during the COVID pandemic because so many services are limited, and we're seeing an uptick in the number fire calls related to mental health and substance use issues."

The CARES Unit will begin service in January 2021. It will be staffed by a team consisting of a firefighter-EMT and Paramedic trained in crisis intervention partnered with a behavioral health

professional. Referrals will be made by Fire, EMS, and police officers in the field who are called out to non-emergency situations. The CARES Unit will not be dispatched by 911 when the program launches, but both the City and the Fire Department see this as the future of the program.

The Kitsap County Commissioners awarded the City of Poulsbo \$305,000 for a 12-month CARES program. Funding is from the County's one-tenth of one percent "treatment tax" fund that has funded mental health and substance use disorder programs since 2015. Fire CARES services will be available throughout North Kitsap.

If you have any questions please contact Kim Hendrickson, Housing Health and Human Services Director at [kimberlyh@cityofpoulsbo.com](mailto:kimberlyh@cityofpoulsbo.com)

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