

Fairbanks eyes early concepts for Emergency Service Patrol

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Jack Barnwell/News-Miner

Visitors take in Golden Heart Plaza in downtown Fairbanks.

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The City of Fairbanks has some initial concepts on how to make its long-standing Emergency Services Patrol program more robust, according to Chief of Staff Michael Sanders.

Sanders said Emergency Services Patrol faces staffing challenges, much like any other public or private entity in the state. The service was inactive for three weeks last fall after all the personnel assigned to the service resigned from Securitas USA, the contracted operator.

“It’s back to being operational but it’s not as robust as we would like it to be,” Sanders said, adding that Securitas regained one of its employees.

The Emergency Service Patrol, formerly the Community Service Patrol, responds to calls of people who are intoxicated or under the influence and in some instances transports them to an approved location to sober up.

The city took over ESP’s management from the Downtown Association of Fairbanks in 2016. Fairbanks, much like the Downtown Association, has used Securitas USA as the contract operator.

The city budgeted Emergency Service Patrol operations for \$130,000 for 2024, with the association providing \$75,000 and the borough funding \$25,000, according to the city’s adopted budget.

The Downtown Association took the old Community Service Patrol from the Fairbanks Native Association in 2007 after federal grant funding expired.

Sanders estimated ESP personnel responded to 5,000 calls in 2023.

“It’s an important service, especially because it’s 5,000 calls that our police officers and paramedics aren’t going on unless it’s needed,” Sanders said. “They divert a lot of calls from the police.”

The Emergency Service Patrol responds to dispatched calls of intoxicated people in public spaces across the city, with a large number in the downtown area. The individuals are, if needed, transported to either a sobering facility, the Fairbanks Correctional Center or another approved location to sober up.

However, city staff have been exploring ways to improve what services can be offered as an extension of the Emergency Services Patrol.

“We are thankful for Securitas doing this service and the gentleman that’s been doing it has a great report with the people he picks up,” Sanders said. “But the thing we’ve noticed is that it’s not a long-term solution. There isn’t the ability to do any follow-up with the people picked up.”

Sanders said a possible solution could involve a peer support specialist or service navigator to connect with people who are repeatedly picked up.

“Someone could follow up with that person and connect them with resources that the city is trying to get going,” Sanders said. Such services might include resources through the city’s homeless coordinator or Crisis Now offices or to re-entry programs.

“We are trying to get another piece to that program so that we have someone to connect to with people when they have a moment of sobriety,” Sanders said.

Sanders said any concept would be separate from the Crisis Now office and the mobile crisis teams supported by Alaska Behavioral Health.

The mobile crisis teams, which include a behavior health clinician and certified peer support specialist, respond to calls where individuals are experiencing an active crisis. Those calls high chance — on average 80% — of being resolved without the need for police presence or hospitalization, according to a February 2024 action report.

Sanders stressed the concept of expanding ESP's role remains an early concept at this point, with only a few staff-level meetings held to discuss it.

“It hasn't gone to the city council yet and is just something we're looking into,” Sanders said. “But it would be the matter of finding the right mix of having Securitas doing what they do and having someone else for those wrap-around services with folks.”

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