

Introducing mental health nurses to the emergency operations centre at the London Ambulance Service

London Ambulance Service NHS Trust

What was the problem?

More people with mental health conditions were calling 999, leading to more ambulances dispatched. This was partly due to the limited availability of out-of-hours crisis mental health services and the increased focus on community care. London Ambulance Service (LAS) recognised it needed to do more to ensure the right staff, with the right skills, provided the best possible care for these patients.

What was the solution?

Increasing staff's ability to provide expert specialist mental health advice by supporting call handlers when dealing with challenging or complex calls. Key interventions included:

- recruiting six mental health nurses to the clinical hub team, to 'hear and treat' while handling calls
- screening mental health calls using a risk assessment tool
- directly referring patients to the most appropriate mental health community team
- informal and formal awareness and skills training and supervision for staff
- finding ways to support ambulance crews at a mental health related emergency or incident
- finding ways to provide expert advice on complex issues such as clinical risk, the Mental Health Act or Mental Capacity Act.

LAS introduced the solution in February 2015, recruiting three full-time and two part-time nurses, all experienced in acute crisis care management.

What were the results?

The nurses manage on average 19 calls per 12-hour shift, and have:

- improved LAS staff confidence and ability to manage patients in mental health crisis
- reduced avoidable ambulance dispatches
- reduced avoidable journeys to the emergency department.

A full-year evaluation to March 2016 found that out of 5,961 calls, 15.9% (954) that would otherwise have had an ambulance dispatched were managed through a hear-and-treat model. The nurses' growing confidence in the hear-and-treat assessment tools, and their relationships with the mental health teams

across London have made it possible to safely manage more patients without taking them to hospital.

Staff feedback:

- 80.87% of emergency operation centre staff found the nurses' presence beneficial
- 84.61% felt the nurses offered a key benefit, including improved patient assessments and support
- 73.03% felt the nurses improved access and communication with external agencies in relation to mental health.

What were the learning points?

- Multi-agency engagement is critical – the model required support from the clinical commissioning groups, mental health trusts and patient representatives.
- LAS can identify effective and ineffective pathways. Clear feedback to partners is essential to inform continued service improvement, consistency of crisis care provision and parity of esteem.
- Invest in team building and relationships for workforce change: develop a shared understanding of the scope and nature of the service and roles.

Find out more

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