



June 3, 2024

Delivered via email to service@hcp4.net

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Re: Pausing of HART Funds

Dear Commissioner Briones,

I am writing on behalf of Texas Appleseed to express our concern about the [decision to pause funding to the county mental health program, HART.](#)

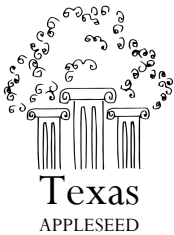
Texas Appleseed is a data-driven nonprofit committed to supporting children, families and communities through policy change. We work at the state and local level to shape policies that are fair, just, and equitable for all Texans.

Since 2022, the HART program has been a promising initiative that strives to increase access to mental health professionals in critical times of need, diverting folks from unnecessary legal system involvement, alleviating the jail population, and freeing up officer time to focus on public safety.

The Commissioner Court's concerns regarding the use of third-party vendor DEMA in aiding the evaluation and expansion of HART is valid. However, since the investigation by the County Auditor's Office has yielded the \$270,000 payment already made as [legitimate and billed at the appropriate rate](#), **we urge you to reconsider your vote against funding the program.**

The Criminal Justice Project at Texas Appleseed published an [issue brief](#) highlighting the benefits of alternative crisis response programs with a focus on Houston. Additionally, we will soon be publishing a national report examining police calls for service across five states, including Texas. In that report, HART will be highlighted as an emerging program that not only adds value to the work of the Harris Center, but is illustrative of what can be achieved when a mental health professional presence-first response is taken.

While the [Harris Center](#) does operate the Crisis Call Diversion (CCD) Program and a Mobile Crisis Outreach Rapid Response Team (MCOT RR) - which combined is of a similar structure to HART- their primary collaboration is with the Houston Police Department. HART aims to serve the remainder of the communities within Harris County, especially those that illustrate the highest needs. And while the Harris Center's Mobile Crisis Outreach Team ([MCOT](#)) is available to the Sheriff's Office if needed, it is only when the Office indicates said need, and requires contact to be made through the Center's crisis line, not 911 dispatchers.



Since its launch, the HART program [has diverted more than 11,000 calls](#) from Harris County law enforcement. Most of these calls result in information being shared or introductions being made in case of future need. The data we have examined for our national report shows that *any* call for service takes, *at minimum*, 31 minutes to respond to (i.e., time spent en route + time spent on-scene). Meaning that the HART program has spared Harris County officers, at least, thousands of work hours to be reallocated to more serious and criminally related needs.

We believe that a vote against the continuation of HART's funding will have unexpected ripple effects. Effects that contribute to the criminalization of mental health; perpetuates mistrust between residents and the systems that were created to serve them; and ultimately increases the challenges faced by residents that are already struggling.

Again, we urge you to please reconsider your vote to suspend the funding for the HART program, and allow the HART team to continue their efforts to make Harris County a healthier and happier one. Thank you for your time and consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

Natasha Malik
Staff Attorney
Criminal Justice Project
Texas Appleseed