

NC county approves community paramedicine program after jump in 911 calls

The county's 911 calls rose by more than 2,500 in 2019 and officials hope to follow the example of another county that successfully reduced calls

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CALDWELL COUNTY, N.C. — Caldwell County will create a program that seeks to divert some non-emergency cases away from the 911 and emergency health care systems.

The Caldwell County Board of Commissioners voted Monday night to approve Emergency Services Director Dino DiBernardi's plan for a Community Paramedic Program. They also approved spending almost \$80,000 to buy and outfit two SUVs for the program.



Caldwell County Emergency Services Directors Dino DiBernardi's plan for a community paramedicine program was approved by county commissioners on Monday. The commissioners approved the purchase of two new SUVs for the program; DiBernardi said no new hires will be needed. (Photo/Caldwell County Emergency Services Facebook)

DiBernardi said that the two paramedics needed for the program will come from elsewhere in the Emergency Services Department. There will be no added positions.

The paramedics in the program will target people who frequently call 911 for help with problems that are not true emergencies requiring an ambulance and a full crew. They would try to coordinate with local agencies and nonprofit organizations to get the services that address what the people really need.

The number of calls made to 911 in Caldwell County jumped by more than 2,500 in 2019, going over 17,000, DiBernardi said. He hopes that the paramedic program will reduce that number over time as a similar program in McDowell County has done in the past few years.

McDowell County's 911 calls peaked in 2014 at 10,298. The number has dropped each year since its community paramedic program began and last year was just 9,104.

DiBernardi said he hopes to have Caldwell's program ready to begin at the start of the new budget year, which is July 1.

When DiBernardi gave a presentation in December about his proposal, several of the commissioners said they wanted to see details about any new spending and who would supervise the new program. They said they did not want to see DiBernardi taking on the responsibility because he already has too much to do and probably could not launch it adequately himself.

On Monday night, in addition to the specified costs related to the SUVs, DiBernardi presented an organizational chart that showed the two paramedics being supervised by Dr. Diana McClinton, the Caldwell County EMS medical director.

Commissioners Mike Labrose, Donnie Potter and Robbie Wilkie said that DiBernardi's presentation answered their questions, and Potter said he was "super-excited" about the program.

But Commissioner Jeff Branch remained skeptical.

"We've got too many irons in the fire to be implementing new programs at this time," he said.

Branch was the only commissioner to vote against starting the program.

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