

Crisis Support Services in Alameda County

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

When your loved one is in crisis, with a mental health breakdown or other urgent condition, what can you do? Both the City of Berkeley and Alameda County operate mobile crisis teams and hotlines.

Stephanie Lewis, MFT, is currently Division Director of Crisis Services for [Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services](#). She provides oversight, direction, planning, and development for the full spectrum of services and a multidisciplinary team within the county's Crisis Division. **Michael Bernath, PhD, MFT**, is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and the new Mental Health Clinical Supervisor for [Berkeley Mental Health's](#) Crisis Assessment and Triage program.



Crises in Alameda County

Stephanie Lewis has more than 20 years of experience working in collaboration with law enforcement and emergency medical services—including Berkeley Mental Health, where she interned—providing crisis mental health services to individuals, and more than 15 years of experience providing various trainings to consumers, clinicians, community providers, and law enforcement on mental health crisis assessment and intervention. The Crisis Division is now expanding services throughout the county.

STEPHANIE LEWIS, MFT

“Our goal,” she said, “is to provide the right services to the individual at the right time—meeting the individual’s need.” Lewis termed this the “Crisis Continuum of Care.”

The first things to know in a crisis are where the person is, what has helped them in the past, and what resources they need. “Most people can figure this out for themselves,” she said. And she emphasized that not all mental health crises need to be resolved with a 911 call and hospitalization.

Alameda County has the highest rate of 5150s¹ in the state. “And we need to redirect some of those to a lower level of service.” For example, John George Psychiatric Pavilion in San Leandro is the county’s psychiatric hospital, but individuals seeking voluntary stabilization might go to Amber House in Oakland, run by [Bay Area Community Services, Inc.](#) (BACS). This facility serves both men and women adults and offers 24-hour stabilization and longer-term residential programs.

The continuum includes first giving the person a welfare check, followed by

¹ A three-day involuntary hold under Welfare & Institutions Code 5150 for a person who is a danger to self or others or gravely disabled.

assessment and evaluation, and then intervention as needed, with diversion from acute services if possible. “We want to determine what they need in the moment, and then we determine what they need down the line,” she said.

The county offers ongoing services at three levels. The highest is the Full Service Partnership, for the highest utilizers, usually people in frequent contact with hospitals and the police; this level includes service every day, with case management three times a week. Level 1 includes case management for two to three days and then a referral to other services. (The former Level 2 is no longer offered.) And Level 3 is for medication only. The goal of crisis management is to follow up with the person within 24 to 48 hours after the crisis.

The Crisis Division fields three different teams:

- **Mobile Crisis Teams (MCT)**—two clinicians in a county vehicle who focus on early intervention, prevention, and care connection at “hot spots” like BART stations and homeless encampments.
- **Mobile Evaluation Teams (MET)**—a clinician and a police officer focusing on 911-dispatched mental health crisis calls in Oakland.
- **Community Assessment and Alternative Transportation Teams (CATT)**—a clinician and an emergency medical technician (EMT) focusing on community-based crisis intervention and medical clearance (i.e., a medical evaluation, which is required for people over 60).

Lewis noted that police are needed for 5150 calls, because clinicians do not have authority to detain people, especially if they bolt from the scene. Also, a patrol car can get to a site faster than a county vehicle. The new CATT team is needed because the clinicians in a county vehicle are unable to transport people to a treatment center like Cherry Hill for detox or Amber House. The EMT can also provide medical clearance as needed.

The teams operate from Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. They would like to expand to weekend hours this year, but the county is going through a staffing crisis, with 16 open and unfilled positions.

To reach Crisis Services and speak with an on-duty clinician, call 510-891-5600 during business hours. After 5:30 p.m., call the county’s ACCESS number, 800-491-9099. (In Berkeley and Albany, call 510-981-5254.)

Lewis said that police officers get training in mental health intervention, including seven hours at the academy and then for some officers the supplemental Crisis Intervention Training (CIT), in which NAMI has participated. This training involves 40 hours and includes topics like intellectual development issues, Alzheimer’s and dementia, substance abuse, cultural responsiveness, working with family members, and a tour of local facilities. Lewis noted that on a 911 call you can ask for a CIT-trained officer if available.

Starting in 2019, the Crisis Division also fields three teams for follow-up services:

- **Community Connection Teams (CCT)**—a clinician with a peer or family provider for outreach to homeless camps with linkage to long-term services.
- **Familiar Faces**—for high-utilization people who are not accessing services

available in home, at the hospital, or for the homeless. This team is 80% staffed by peers and family members.

- **Post Crisis Follow-up Team (PCFT)**—to conduct calls within 24 to 48 hours to non-high utilizers. This team is also staffed by peers and family members.

Crises in Berkeley and Albany

Berkeley is one of only two cities in California—Pomona is the other—with their own mental health services; elsewhere such services are provided at the county level. Michael Bernath is new in his position with Berkeley Mental Health’s Crisis Assessment and Triage (CAT) hotline. His program only began operating last August, with statistics from October and later.



*MICHAEL BERNATH, PHD,
MFT*

The call line is available Monday to Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. (with hours set by grant limitations) at 510-891-2544. Walk-in hours at 1521 University Avenue, Berkeley, are Monday to Thursday from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. The staff of three or four people, including Bernath himself—and still understaffed²—takes about 40 or 50 calls a month and handles 10 to 12 intakes a day.

“A lot of crises can be handled over the phone,” Bernath says. “Some calls we evaluate and send to the Mobile Crisis Team or the police, others we link to available services.” He estimates that 75% of walk-ins are screened to supportive counseling or linked to

Berkeley Mental Health or other services.

Bernath noted that crisis calls don’t necessarily have to involve a mental illness. Screening identifies what is going on with the individual and what resources in the community are available.

Q. Are Berkeley-Albany residents sent for hospitalization to John George?

Yes, unless they need medical clearance, then they are taken to the Alta Bates emergency room and, generally, go on to Herrick Hospital. In Oakland and the rest of the county, clearance takes place at the nearest emergency room.

Q. How do you deal with people who have anosognosia, or lack of insight into their illness, and get them to agree to services?

Rather than talk about mental illness or any diagnosis, it helps to ask the person if they’re feeling stressed or overwhelmed. You can also ask if they can take care of their basic needs. You need to develop a rapport with the person and focus on helping them think about options. This, of course, takes time.

Q. My daughter is a legal resident of Vallejo in Solano County, yet she often visits and stays with us in Oakland. If she has a crisis, can I call the Alameda County crisis team?

Berkeley Mental Health can offer screening and several services to non-residents. Alameda County Behavioral Health responds to anyone who calls them.

² Bernath said that the Mobile Crisis Team, consisting of two people, is also temporarily unavailable due to staffing issues. Services should return in February.