Tulsa Fire Department C.A.R.E.S
Community Assistance Referral & Education Services
Making Connections for Tulsans in Need
In recent years, Tulsa has seen a growing trend of “high-utilizers,” people who call 911 more than 15 times per year, often for non-emergencies. Responding places a strain on the Tulsa Fire Department’s time, energy, and resources.

Tulsa Fire Department started the CARES pilot program in 2016 to reduce high-utilizers’ calls. CARES connects high-utilizers with healthcare and social service providers such as Mental Health Association Oklahoma, Family & Children Services, and St. John’s Health System.

From January to March of 2017, CARES reduced calls from the top ten high-utilizers by 70 percent.

CARES needs support for full-time staff, additional workspace, and upgraded technology. Such improvements will help CARES connect more Tulsans to needed services, while reducing the number of non-emergency calls to first responders.

When a 911 call comes in, it costs the City of Tulsa thousands of dollars to respond. This figure is particularly important in light of Tulsa’s “high-utilizer” problem. The Tulsa Fire Department recognizes a high-utilizer as a person who makes 15 or more phone calls to 911 in a year. Some people have called more than 100 times in a single year. Responding to these calls impacts the availability of responders for higher priority calls and may cost the city thousands of dollars per each call.

CARES is a pilot program started by the Tulsa Fire Department in 2016. Led by Chief Michael Baker, the program began as a response to the growing trend of callers requesting emergency services for non-emergency situations. Many calls were for lift assists, unsafe living conditions, or transportation issues—problems that local health care and social service agencies could solve.

Today, CARES’ mission is to connect Tulsans with supportive services to address their medical, physical, and mental health needs, while reducing their dependence on calling 911. From January to March of 2017, CARES reduced calls among the top ten high-utilizers by 70 percent.
CARES community partners include Mental Health Association Oklahoma, Family & Children Services, & St. John’s Health System. CARES connects these partners with clients who may not otherwise have access to services and helps reduce hospital readmission rates. CARES plans to continue these relationships and seeks additional partnership opportunities.

Currently, CARES operates with no dedicated funding source. Even with its many successes, in the pilot phase, CARES will need additional resources as it takes on more clients. All CARES staff are currently part-time, including three social work interns from University of Oklahoma who are supervised by Mental Health Association Oklahoma. To move beyond the pilot phase, the program needs full-time professional staff, office space, and technological support.