

Date: March 5, 2025

Subject: Recommendation for Rual Response Wellness Services for EMS and First Responders

To: Measure Z Board

I am writing to express my strong support for the integration of Rual Response Programs by Mrs. Shannan O'Neal, LCSW.

Wellness programs for EMS and first responders have demonstrated significant benefits in enhancing mental health and overall well-being among first responders. Specifically Equine-Assisted programs along with nontraditional group therapy can develop diverse healing opportunities. By using a variety of methods, will assist with focusing on self-awareness, stress reduction, and work -life balance. I can only imagine the opportunity of learning the varied skills that will assist first responders with personal wellness, alleviating stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

I am currently working in my 35<sup>th</sup> year of Law Enforcement with the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office. The majority of my career is working within the Correctional Facility, during this time I can count on one hand of the officers who have retired after 30 years of service to our community. This alone should tell you about the difficulties we face, hiring and retaining long term officers due to the environment we work in.

The demanding nature of EMS, and Law Enforcement, should welcome any type of wellness programs that will provide valuable mental well-being for our valued first responders, and county employees.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marco A. Luna #0812". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the number "#0812" written at the end.

Ret. Lt. Marco A. Luna, Background Investigator

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Matthew N. Helm  
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March 4, 2025

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for the *Rural Response: Wellness, Stress Management, and Resiliency Building for Emergency Responders and Public Safety Officers* program. This essential initiative provides a much-needed space for Humboldt County's emergency responders to prioritize their mental health and well-being in a supportive and accessible setting. I have been employed in the first responder sector for twenty four years and have been utilized as a subject matter expert for Shannan O'Neal, LCSW, during the inception of *Rural Response*.

First responders, including law enforcement and fire personnel, experience immense occupational stress, trauma, and personal challenges that can significantly impact their mental, emotional, and physical health. Despite the critical nature of their work, access to specialized mental health support in rural communities such as Humboldt County remains limited, especially to clinicians who are culturally competent to treat those in the first responder field. *Rural Response* bridges this gap by offering trauma-informed, community-driven group therapy facilitated by a licensed mental health professional who has been trained in the dynamics of culturally relevant support for emergency responders.

*Rural Response* distinguishes itself through its all-encompassing and holistic methodology. By combining traditional group therapy with a variety of healing practices—including equine-assisted services, partnerships with local therapists, guidance from Native Elders, medical professionals, sound healing, and nature-based therapies—this program guarantees that responders benefit from a well-rounded support system. This adaptable and responsive framework empowers participants to tackle their individual challenges, whether they arise from critical incidents, family issues, administrative demands, or personal experiences. Additionally, the provision of separate drop-in groups for law enforcement and fire personnel ensures that each group receives customized support in a secure and confidential setting. *Rural Response* can effectively complement in-place first responder wellness programs by offering modalities not provided by current contracted services.

The continuous, year-round framework of *Rural Response* promotes enduring resilience and well-being, providing responders with a chance to reconnect with their passions, manage stress, and maintain their overall health. This initiative not only supports the individuals dedicated to

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serving our communities but also enhances the public safety system as a whole, ensuring that responders are more effectively prepared to meet the challenges of their responsibilities.

I personally encourage the provision of support for this essential program. The welfare of our emergency responders is crucial to ensuring the safety and health of our communities. *Rural Response* represents a forward-thinking, innovative, and vital initiative that merits the comprehensive support of our community, decision-makers, and financial contributors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matthew Helm". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Matthew N. Helm

March 11, 2025

Dear Measure Z Chair and Committee Members,

I wanted to reach out and share my gratitude for your consideration and approval of our 2025 application. I never feel like I can verbalize clearly the understanding of what you are required to do and that it is not a position I would want to hold. However, I appreciate that there are community members, community leaders and First Responders such as yourselves that are willing to represent this county and ensure the process is upheld and needs are met as much as you can.

Your approval of our application will ensure EPD has the needed safety equipment to further protect our officers and staff during the most critical and dangerous calls we answer. A simple thank you doesn't seem to be enough. You may never know how your decision affected the safety of my employees and let's pray the equipment never gets challenged by a threat, but having it, deploying it, will keep us in the fight to protect our community at the highest level.

So, on behalf of the Men and Women of the EPD, we Thank You!

Godspeed,



Brian Stephens  
Chief of Police

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Seth Crosswhite and I am a local Humboldt County first responder for the past 25 years. I am writing this letter in support of Shannan O'Neal in her request for funding for her mental health program for first responders. I have worked with and spoken with Shannan on several occasions regarding her program and her desire to build a sustainable and badly needed program for local first responders to receive the much-needed assistance we need. In our conversations we have discussed the need for a program such as hers, the benefits of such a program and how to make it the best for first responders in our community as possible.

We as first responders see, do and deal with traumatic and chaotic situations on a daily basis. Many of these situations can be very mentally taxing and hard to process. As it stands now there is very little to no assistance or services locally for our first responders to process and work through these situations. Many first responders over their careers will suffer from and be diagnosed with PTSD because of the many horrible things we see and deal with. Having a program like Shannan's to assist first responders with counseling services that are affordable and readily available is something that is badly needed.

In today's world there is a big push for law enforcement reform, better training etc... for all first responders. Local agencies and local government spend thousands, if not millions of dollars, on equipment, training of all kinds, and other things necessary for first responders to do their jobs. But there is almost no money being spent on helping these first responders with the traumas of the everyday job. What better way to help first responders not only process and heal from these traumas than supporting Shannan's program with much needed funding. When you have first responders who get all the training the job provides its beneficial, but you can also help first responders train their minds and heal their minds, it will only make that first responder that much better at their job, in addition to the training we already do. When a first responder is able to process, mentally heal and be in a better place after traumatic situations, that same first responder will also be able to be more empathetic, sympathetic, and less likely to potentially lose control of themselves in a situation they may not have been able to before.

It's time to spend money on the first responders keeping this community safe. Shannan's program will work with Cal Poly Humboldt to train new therapists and counselors to work with first responders. It is a huge win for our community and first responders. It will also provide better access to local first responders to get that assistance they need locally and better availability with those services. Instead of how it is now waiting weeks or months to find someone who is competently trained and certified to assist first responders with these issues if you can find anyone at all. Typically, first responders EAP's through their job offers little to assistance and Humboldt County first responders must travel out of the area to get assistance at their own cost with can possibly be in the thousands of dollars, with gas, lodging, food and payment for counseling services.

I implore you to consider providing funding for this program and think of the benefits not to just your local Humboldt first responders, but also the benefit to the community as a whole when first responders are not just healthy and trained physically but also healthy and trained mentally. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Seth Crosswhite



Blue Lake Volunteer Fire Department  
111 First Ave. Blue Lake CA, 95525  
(707) 668-5765

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To Whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter in support of Shannan O'Neal and her new Rural Response program. Shannan has been working tirelessly to ensure that her program is suited to the needs of Humboldt County's first responders. I have been thoroughly impressed with her commitment to making this a comprehensive program. I have seen the work she has put into this including seeking assistance and suggestions from folks in the first responder realm such as myself. Shannan has been open to modifications on her program and suggestions for improvement, as well as immersing herself in the lifestyle to truly understand the difficulties that come with this line of work.

I have personally witnessed Shannan excited to do ride-alongs with multiple different agencies as well as attending trainings and meetings with local fire agencies to be sure our local first responders know that the resources she offers are tailored to them. I first met Shannan at a Critical Incident Stress Management training where she was happy to be a part of assisting first responders with stress management after critical incidents. This is a huge opportunity for this area, as there are not any other local programs that focus so heavily on first responders specifically. I believe Shannan is the perfect fit to fill that void in Humboldt County because of her passion for helping those who serve.

I have no doubt her Rural Response Program will be successful. I have seen her drafts throughout her process and have given input as needed. She has been an absolute joy to work with and is in my eyes the best possible candidate to begin this program. Her warm and welcoming demeanor will be known throughout the county at the start of this program. I have no doubt about that.

Thank you,  
Battalion Chief  
Talia Flores  
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4 March 2025

Tonya Rott  
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To Whom it May Concern

It is with great honor and pleasure that I write a letter to support and encourage the continued forward movement of a wellness, stress management and resiliency building program that Shannan O'Neal is creating with Rural Response.

As an active first responder in the Humboldt County community for nearly 13 years, I have experienced not only my own burn out, but have seen the loss of my peers through burn out as well. First responders have historically "pushed it down." leading to increased rates of divorce, substance use, leaving the field of work and even suicide. It is time we begin to talk about mental health and find culturally competent clinicians to understand we are normal humans exposed to abnormal and traumatic situations multiple times a day. Often we take a reactive approach to an incident that we call a "career ender" and with Rural Response, there is a goal of taking a proactive approach in wellness, stress management and resiliency that can assist with a longer fulfilling career and a healthier life with thriving platonic and romantic relations.

Humboldt County lacks the resources for first responders to engage with culturally competent clinicians. Shannan sees the need to help our law enforcement, firefighters (paid and volunteer) along with the EMS community. She has gone above and beyond to understand the culture. She has not only read handfults of books about the culture and engaged in multiple emergency responder focused trainings and has spent countless hours building relationships with our population. She has put forth her whole heart and soul to submerge herself into our world with ride-alongs and asking all the questions that are difficult and needed. Shannan recognizes the effectiveness and importance of both one-on-one therapy and Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD) in supporting first responders and she understands that group therapy is not a replacement for either, but serves as a powerful enhancement. Her program is designed to bridge the gap by offering both preventive care and ongoing wellness support, helping responders access support sooner. By providing a space for regular processing and peer connection, these groups can help alleviate some of the intense symptoms from the traumatic events we see so often. She sees and understands that there is this world of humans that all process trauma and life in a very different way, and believes that using groups and unconventional methods of treatment,

such as, but not limited to, equine therapy, expressive art and music, while creating a safe and confidential place. This place would allow for conversation and more access for first responders to engage in processing and healing

I, personally as a first responder, who is working scheduled hours and overtime to make a living, would love to see a program that is supplemented by the county to allow access to all first responders for low to no cost. There is such potential for this program to grow, for first responders to remain in a career that begins as a calling and a passion.

If you have any further questions or would like to talk more about what Shannan has to offer, please do not hesitate to contact me.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tonya Rott', with a stylized, cursive script.

Tonya Rott  
Paramedic