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**\*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE\***

Last month the Hunt County Commissioner's Court took bold action and approved a FY2023 budget that included funding for four (4) full-time mental health peace officer positions and two (2) social workers to assist the Hunt County jail mental health population. These positions will be employed by the Hunt County Sheriff's Office. This joint initiative between law enforcement and the mental health community will hopefully result in improved care management for Hunt County persons suffering from a mental crisis and less incarceration for those non-violent individuals in serious need of mental health treatment.

For decades, the Hunt County jail has been overpopulated by non-violent offenders suffering from mental illness. The Hunt County jail staff has been left in a no-win situation – there not mental health professionals qualified to provide the level of necessary care for these individuals. As protectors of the community, Hunt County peace officers have for too long dealt with mental health contacts without adequate mental health resources or treatment facilities.

Effective October 1, 2022, the Hunt County Sheriff's Office will finally be able to provide local help towards the mental health crisis confronting all of Texas. These full-time mental health positions will be filled by TCOLE certified mental health peace officers who have specialized training to deal with a mental crisis. These officers will be able to respond to mental crisis 911 calls and possibly deescalate the situation while using the appropriate amount of restraint, if necessary, and detect & divert those needing mental health treatment, not incarceration.

The expectation is that in the near future Hunt County will have a

Multi-Disciplinary Team (“MDT”) better equipped to respond to mental health emergencies. The MDT would include the Hunt County mental health officers, a qualified mental health clinician, and a paramedic, capable of handling all aspects of a mental health crisis. In addition, Hunt County is part of the North Texas Behavioral Health Authority (“NTBHA”) service area, which provides a 24/7 Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (“MCOT”). The MDT will work closely with MCOT and with local mental health inpatient treatment facilities to expand placement options, if needed. For mental health outpatient options and continuity of care, the MDT will be assisted by Lakes Regional Community Center and the NTHBA Care Coordinator for Hunt County.

These specialized peace officers will also be able to provide much needed follow-up care for those mentally ill persons requesting it, on a strictly voluntary basis. Follow-up care can be provided to any known individual suffering from a mental crisis and/or illness, including those individuals who have had a recent mental health crisis encounter with law enforcement and jail inmates who have been released. The follow-up care will include, but not limited to, general welfare checks, transportation if needed to a mental health appointment or facility, and providing information about available local mental health resources.

The Hunt County Attorney’s Office is responsible for filing all court-ordered mental health in-patient applications for Hunt County residents, and these specialized officers will work closely with that office to initiate and coordinate mental health court proceedings, if necessary. The Hunt County Attorney’s Office will also provide legal assistance to these specialized officers.

If you or someone you know is in need of mental health services, please remember 9-8-8, a 24/7 mental crisis hotline available to Hunt County citizens. If the situation is an emergency, please contact your local law enforcement agency or dial 9-1-1.