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Harrisonburg emergency services partner to Handle With Care

HARRISONBURG, Va. – Staff and officials with Harrisonburg's Fire, Police and Emergency Communication teams are coming together with Harrisonburg City Public Schools to support local students who may be struggling through a tough time.

The program, called Handle With Care, will officially kick off August 15 and will be in use when students return to class next week. It will work to ensure that children who are exposed to violence or other traumatic events receive appropriate school-based interventions to maximize their academic success.

(Above) The Harrisonburg Fire Department already works on a number of programs with local students. The Handle With Care program will increase the ways City departments support youth.

Through Handle With Care, Harrisonburg first responders will identify students who may have been impacted by an emergency call, and then work with the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Emergency Communication Center to notify the students' schools that they should be "handled with care" the next day. School administration will only receive the student's name and the message "handle with care." No other personal information will be included.

That notification simply allows the school administrators and teacher to keep an eye on that child and support them throughout the day, understanding that they may be more tired than usual, not have their homework complete, or even be acting out, and gently engage the child with support services as needed.

City officials are eager to begin the effort to more closely support local students.

"We are very excited to partner with Harrisonburg City Public Schools and other emergency services to help children in our community," Harrisonburg Fire Chief Ian Bennett said. "The HWC program allows departments to gain a better understanding and ability to assist the community with trauma and mental health as to the best of our abilities."

Added Harrisonburg Police Department Lt. Jason Kidd, "Handle With Care helps us as a community to minimize the effects of trauma on children, and we are proud to be among one of the first areas in the state to implement the program. Through the collaboration with our agency partners in this program, we have learned more about our shared goals. Helping to provide the best possible school and life circumstances for our children is certainly among the most important of these goals."

A group of Harrisonburg High School service-learning students worked with City staff earlier this year to evaluate the interest and feasibility of bringing Handle With Care to Harrisonburg City Public Schools, to overwhelming support and interest. The program originated in West Virginia in 2013, though the Harrisonburg effort will be the largest Handle With Care program in our area.

More information on the program can be found at www.handlewithcarewv.org.

The City of Harrisonburg is centrally located in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. It is home to approximately 54,000 people. More information about the City of Harrisonburg is available online at www.HarrisonburgVA.gov.

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