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By Karla Rendon-Alvarez, NBC San Diego
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The city of El Cajon launched on Tuesday a pilot program that aims to decrease the number of unnecessary ambulance calls and emergency room visits.

Dubbed the El Cajon Community Care program, the new initiative will connect 911 callers who have non-life threatening needs to a "nurse navigator." That individual will be a state-licensed nurse who will determine what level of medical attention callers need and recommend urgent care visits, telehealth appointments, prescription refills and more.

Ambulances will still be dispatched for urgent and life-threatening emergencies, a city spokesperson said.

"The aim of the program is to connect the caller with the right level of care while easing the burden on first responders and freeing them up to respond to other life-threatening emergencies," Dave Richards, Assistant to the El Cajon City Manager, said in a statement.

According to the city, about 16,000 medical-related 911 calls are made in El Cajon. Roughly one-third of those calls are not an emergency.

The new $300,000 program comes as part of a partnership between the city and American Medical Response. City officials said there is no cost to the caller to access the nurse navigator.

Already, the program has been underway in San Bernardino and emergency personnel say it's been successful.

Gilbert Lopez of the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department said public awareness of the new initiative will be essential since some callers may push back when they're being transferred to a nurse. However, he said callers ultimately realize getting connected to care over the phone instead of a costly trip to the emergency room is a better option.

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