REIMAGINING
PUBLIC
SAFETY

DESIGNING A REIMAGINED SYSTEM
Decision Points

There is a growing consensus that we simply ask the police to do too much, and that using police as all-purpose first responders just isn't working. Not every call for help is addressed best by an armed police officer. Included in this consensus are community leaders, advocates, and police themselves, who long have recognized that officers are not one-size-fits-all social engineers and lack the training or capacity to deal with every problem society puts on them.

So how can we redesign our first response systems to address community needs better and reduce over-reliance on police?

For the past two years, we have engaged with jurisdictions across the country to understand their vision for public safety and consider the potential role of alternative response. Some are in the early stages of reimagining, and others already are testing approaches with programs that vary widely in their function, structure, goals, budget, size, workforce composition, call volume, dispatch model, and relationship to the community.

Our Research Team, comprised of quantitative and qualitative methodologists and social scientists, is learning about how communities define public safety, and how alternative response is working in communities that are trying it. It examines local calls for service data. It explores the perspectives of community members. And it talks with public safety practitioners of all sorts — from dispatchers and alternative responders, to police chiefs, police offices, and policymakers.

Our Design Team, comprised of experts in public health, public safety, community, government, and social services, posed and worked to answer some of the tough questions about what alternative response should accomplish, and how to solve problems associated with alternative response. It came together in a bi-weekly roundtable to discuss these issues. Throughout this process, we also reached out to numerous specialists, from academia to city halls, when we encountered specific questions and challenges on which we required additional help.
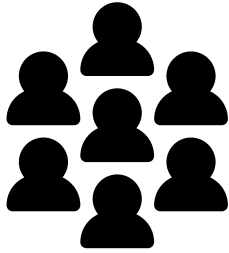
All told, we have engaged with hundreds of stakeholders, each with different roles to play.

Based on all this research and discovery, we have identified a series of key decision points that jurisdictions will face when creating, expanding, or modifying alternative response programs. We have grouped these into four stages of development a jurisdiction must pass through to create and launch a successful alternative response program:

- Engage the community

- Scope the program

- Identify the proper responders

- Focus on dispatch

What follows is a road map through these four stages, providing background, context, and suggestions to help guide decision-making. Throughout, we provide links to additional detail and real-world examples. We hope this road map will help you get started!

In the course of our discussion we frequently refer to models that are currently used in various jurisdictions. We have not evaluated every model discussed here, and that is important work that needs to be done. But it is helpful to think in terms of concrete examples, so we include them here.

Engage the Community

Reimagining public safety must be centered on community values and goals. Even the best of intentions can go astray if programs are designed without consulting the people who will be affected by them most.

Engage the public in program design early and continuously. Any approach to reimagining must be built on a foundation of early and ongoing community engagement, especially with communities most impacted by policing and whose lived experiences can inform strategies for improving safety and trust. Jurisdictions might begin by identifying official and unofficial leaders, organizations, and entities that represent residents' experiences and work with them collaboratively to design a public plan for community involvement.

Jurisdictions have utilized a variety of community engagement strategies that offer useful models to draw upon. Several important questions to consider:

- How will your jurisdiction solicit and act upon community guidance, both initially and ongoingly?

- What structures will be put in place to ensure transparency and community buy-in in the implementation and operation of new models?

- How will your jurisdiction ensure that advisory boards, oversight committees, or other governance structures are demographically and culturally reflective of the communities they serve?

- Will residents who participate in providing input and/or oversight be compensated for their time?

Message new models to the public. Messaging cannot be an afterthought. It is essential to program success from the get-go. Before a program launches, have a clear strategy for communicating its goals, design, and means of access so that public expectations are aligned with program function. Are there credible messengers or entities in your jurisdiction that can be tapped to promote new alternatives? Have you undertaken similar public messaging campaigns in the past that you can draw on for inspiration? Can social media and new media be utilized to reach a wider range of residents? Consider these questions carefully and be sure that your message is especially well-targeted toward residents most likely to utilize new services.

Look to other cities, but tailor models to your local needs. Sharing information among jurisdictions is at the very heart of our work on Reimagining Public Safety, and we naturally encourage jurisdictions to draw on successful models, while also learning from those that stalled. However, every community is unique, and local factors – history, demographics, geography, resources, etc. – must be considered before simply importing a template that worked elsewhere.

REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

Scope the Program

Following community engagement, the next step is scoping the program – determining its basic purpose, structure, and properties.

Engage practitioners and other internal stakeholders. Alternative response programs rely on the coordination and collaboration of stakeholders across government agencies and across all ranks. Learning from practitioners of the work — from policymakers to 911 call takers, police leadership to paramedics — is a critical first step and should be part of an ongoing effort. It is important not only to learn from their insights and experiences, but also to put these different stakeholder groups in conversation with each other early in the process. This will build the familiarity and trust that will make the program successful.

Articulate the goals of the program. Even within a single jurisdiction, policymakers and frontline staff can have widely divergent views about the goals of an alternative responder program. Is the program intended to: Reduce calls to 911? Decrease police workload? Provide better connections to care for residents? Promote harm reduction? Decrease officer involved shootings? Any program could have some or even all of these goals, but it is vital to define program goals clearly and explicitly. That is because these goals will serve as the basis for program design, data collection, messaging to the public, and assessment of performance.

Identify what community issues (or calls for service) to address. This decision may sound simple, yet is anything but. It often starts with an analysis of calls for service data and benefits from careful collaboration with the community. Fortunately, there are models to draw upon. In Ithaca, NY, a multi-stakeholder working group led by the Center for Policing Equity voted to determine which calls for service should be recommended for a non-police response. Several jurisdictions, such as Chicago and New York, began with behavioral health-focused responses. Others have rolled out more specialized programs to address a particular resource gap that the community identified, such as the mediation response program in Dayton, Ohio. Identifying strong local partners through community capacity and resource mapping also can help to determine the substantive focus of the program, as in the case of Atlanta's Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative and Eugene, Oregon's CAHOOTS program. Finally, once the call types are established, cities should ensure they have a process for adjusting and adding to the call types as the program grows over time.

Identify the services to be provided. Once alternative responders arrive on the scene, what will they do? Some possibilities include: crisis stabilization, connection to care, transportation of people to needed services, medical care, locating and providing basic needs like food or clothing, conflict resolution, code enforcement, report writing, and scene security. Identifying intended services early is vital to program design and functionality. To cite one example, a response to behavioral health needs can be strengthened greatly when responders are authorized to transport individuals to services. Indeed, our research in Denver found that transportation to services — such as to get a prescription refilled — was an important a part of the city's STAR program, although transportation may not be an obvious function to include initially in a behavioral health responder program.

Map the available neighborhood resources and assets, then identify the gaps. An accurate community asset or resource map can be essential to understanding needs and service gaps. There are several things to consider as a part of this exercise: aim to include a broad range of trusted local organizations and not just the "usual suspects" of long-established service providers; consider the geographic accessibility of services, recognizing that variable response times can impact the equity of care; and, finally, evaluate barriers that may impede access to care for those who need it, such as homeless shelter rules that require sobriety or exclude pets.

Determine costs and funding mechanisms. We worked with the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) to understand how jurisdictions fund alternative response programs and the factors contributing to funding decisions. Overall, GFOA found that local taxes are the primary funding source, while limited use also is being made of American Rescue Plan Act funds and Medicaid reimbursement. Jurisdictions also should evaluate budget impact holistically, recognizing that costs and savings may materialize in departments or categories not previously accounted for under public safety.

Determine operational responsibility and accountability. Simply removing a function from the police department and placing it under another municipal department does not automatically result in improvement. Jurisdictions should determine carefully the entity best suited to manage an alternative response program, considering organizational capacity, staffing levels, leadership, and culture. Some jurisdictions have established a new department of community safety,

while others have situated their alternative response programs under existing health or fire departments. Once a department is selected, a number of sub-questions arise: Where will the units physically be housed — at a police or fire station? What agency is responsible for logistics and vehicle management, and do they require additional staff to do so?

Determine geographical boundaries. Should the program begin within certain geographical bounds or be jurisdiction-wide? If the former, how should the service area be defined? Many programs begin in limited geographical areas before they scale up, with the selection of specific neighborhoods linked to program goals. For example, Denver launched its alternative response program in the downtown corridor with limited capacity and hours. There are good reasons to start small — projects can be more successful when service providers know the populations they are serving, and focusing initially on a specific area may allow for a higher, more consistent level of service. At the same time, a geographically-limited program may pose challenges for 911 call center staff who only can dispatch alternative responders in certain neighborhoods. Containing alternatives to specific geographies and neighborhoods also may over- or under-serve certain communities. Jurisdictions should be mindful of the racial and ethnic breakdown of their local geographies when making decisions about a program's operating area.

Select hours of operation. Police and other public safety entities employed by the government work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Thus, we must ask: Should a new program also respond to calls 24/7? If not, what hours? Which days of the week? This is in part a question about resources, but also about the nature of the issues requiring response. For example, welfare check calls may appear most frequent during the evening hours; if so, a program seeking to handle the majority of these calls would need to operate during that time. Labor, contract, and shift-work issues also may influence the hours that a program functions. Finally, limitations on hours and days of operation would have to be reflected in messaging to avoid confusion on the part of the public. We address the issue of 24/7 response in greater detail here.

Plan early for evaluation, and do so consistently. An evaluation plan, ideally managed by an experienced evaluation or research partner, should be integrated into overall program development at the earliest possible stage. This will help stakeholders and community members

assess program outcomes and consider program changes. Be cognizant of potential obstacles to data collection and review – for example, privacy restrictions can constrain the tracking of mental health and medical data, so identifying a legally-compliant data collection and evaluation system would be an essential early step.

Consider the role of the police. The diversion of work to alternative responders raises obvious questions about the size, scope and nature of the responsibilities that remain in the hands of the police. We have heard clearly from community members and government officials that they want the police to focus on violent crime and leave the delivery of social services to others. But if police respond only to situations that pose an immediate health or safety crisis, then opportunities to build relationships and trust with community members may be lost. In any reimagining process, communities should be engaged extensively to determine the needs, priorities, and expectations surrounding public safety generally and the role of the police specifically. In a system of reimagined public safety, the proper role of the police is one of the most important considerations.

Define the Responders

Once a jurisdiction has determined what it is trying to achieve with its programming and systems, it is time to dig into specifics about how the alternative system will be staffed, trained, and equipped.

Identify responder skills and experiences. Different community issues require different skills and backgrounds among responders. For example, responders to calls involving unhoused persons may benefit from relevant lived experience and/or knowledge of shelter and housing options. Responders to individuals experiencing mental or behavioral health crises likely benefit from clinical training. Some skill sets are more universally useful, such as scene safety training, administration of Narcan, or conflict resolution, as discussed in The Policing of Social Conflict.

Determine infrastructure and equipment needs. The infrastructure and equipment needs of alternative responders will vary according to their responsibilities. For example, no alternative response system can succeed without the means of connecting those in need with those who can help. Will you use your existing dispatch system, or is there some alternative? Other preliminary questions: What type of transportation or vehicles will responders require? What radio systems, computer

equipment, or electronic databases will responders need to access, and will these be housed within a vehicle or carried on-person? What life-saving equipment (e.g., first aid kits or Narcan for opioid overdoses) should responders carry? What uniform will responders wear, and what impression (if any) will it convey as to who they are? These seemingly simple logistical questions can be unexpectedly complex or even fraught. For example, in one jurisdiction we studied, dispatchers had suggested that alternative responders wear bullet proof vests to ensure their safety. The alternative responders themselves, however, objected strongly, as such equipment conflicted with the goals, philosophy, and intended public messaging of the alternative response program.

Determine whether responders should be public employees or private/non-profit contractors. Engaging well-regarded community organizations can provide flexibility, build trust with stakeholders and the public, and make effective use of existing capacities and relationships. However, contracting out services also can mean lower pay and benefits for alternative responders, which can impact recruitment and worker quality of life negatively. As a staggered approach, jurisdictions might consider initially launching a program with contracted services, then bring the program in-house once service levels have stabilized and the program has matured sufficiently. A hybrid approach also is a possibility, in which the city staffs its responder teams with one non-profit contractor (e.g., a clinician) and one city employee (e.g., a paramedic from the fire department).

If responders are public employees, determine whether they are existing workers or new positions. Civil service regulations, labor dynamics, and contractual obligations can impact any assignment to municipal employees. This issue must be evaluated carefully – and possibly negotiated – before an alternative response program can be established. In New York City, for example, the City negotiated with the EMS unions to include a 6 percent pay differential as additional compensation for the paramedics participating in a behavioral health response pilot.

Decide how alternative responders will be trained, by whom, and how often. Training can be a recurrent challenge for jurisdictions that establish alternative response programs. Although some jurisdictions have been able to organize effective multi-disciplinary training for an initial cohort of responders, the intensive resource demands of such trainings, which pull personnel from a variety of agencies, can be

difficult to replicate when there is staff turnover and a new employee starts. Making training both effective and sustainable is essential.

Consider the legal implications of shifting police duties to alternative responders. In some jurisdictions, there are charters, ordinances, or laws – at either the local or state level – that define the authorities and responsibilities of the police and other municipal actors in very specific terms. These regulations may need to be modified to accommodate new programs.

Focus on Dispatch

With the program designed and staffed, and the public engaged, it's time to consider how 911 call centers will interact with alternative responders and ultimately dispatch them to calls for service. The priorities and judgments implicit in dispatching choices are enormously complex, especially when considering the diversion of calls previously assigned to the police. Without a well-functioning dispatch service, many alternative responder models will encounter serious challenges.

Evaluate the quality, breadth, and flexibility of existing 911 services. Many jurisdictions assume that alternative response options simply can be added to the existing 911 system. Sometimes this assumption proves correct, but not always. Before automatically embracing 911 as the means to deploy new alternatives, evaluate how your 911 system currently is used. Is it efficient? Does it have a culture rigidly aligned with traditional public safety systems and, therefore, potentially resistant to new models? Is the 911 center properly resourced in both funding and staff? Adding new layers on top of an inflexible or overtaxed dispatch system can leave alternative response models destined to fail, regardless of the quality of the program itself. It also is important to consider where 911 is physically sited and by whom it is operationally overseen. In some jurisdictions, 911 is managed and housed within the police department, while in others it may be a standalone entity or even regionalized among multiple jurisdictions. Each arrangement potentially can affect the willingness of callers to utilize the service and the capacity of the jurisdiction to adopt new approaches. Where the 911 system is institutionally located can also have operational implications for alternative response programs. For example, if alternative responders are dispatched out of your city's fire

dispatch center, which does not communicate via radio with the police dispatch center, how will alternative responders be able to call for police back-up quickly if needed?

Examine alternatives to 911. Some jurisdictions already maintain additional call systems that address informational inquiries, not-for-profit engagement, or calls for non-emergency service, such as 311 and 211. If your jurisdiction has such services, and if your 911 organizational culture or capacity appears to be an obstacle, then these can be attractive options. Atlanta's alternative response program, for example, dispatches via 311. However, it is important to consider how responders and dispatchers in this model will interact with other public agencies. It also is necessary to ensure that community members, who may be accustomed to dialing 911 for all public safety matters, are educated fully about the types of calls that should now be directed elsewhere.

Defining an emergency. The 911 system is overrun by calls from the public, and police response times are increasing in many jurisdictions. Alternative response provides a valuable option to shift some calls from the police, but in many places new alternatives respond to but a small share of the total 911 call volume. For this reason, agencies also must have substantive conversations about what makes a call appropriate for 911 in the first place, and when other options (e.g., online resources, use of 211 or 311, responses by city agencies during business hours, etc.) should be developed or used. These conversations are difficult, political, and value-laden. You might think: Who am I to tell someone what is or is not an emergency? Isn't emergency response one of the primary traditional roles of government? But, ignoring these tough questions results in a system that cannot meet demand, puts call-takers and dispatchers in a nearly impossible position (as we've heard through our research), and sets the public up for disappointment as officers show up to calls hours later or without the skill set or training to address the caller's problem.

Build and ensure fidelity around clear, detailed, and user-friendly protocols. Before a new program can be launched, all participants must have a shared understanding of who will be dispatched for what types of calls, how responders will communicate with one another, how the risk of sending one form of responder over another will be assessed and by whom, and how escalations will be handled. Confusion on any of these points can quickly generate mistrust between alternative responders and traditional system actors, not to mention raise the

possibility of problems in the field. As part of our RPS project, the University of Chicago Health Lab analyzed alternative response call center protocols and developed a call taking protocol assessment tool, which outlines the essential categories of information and guidance that should be included in an alternative response call taking protocol. A clear protocol also will provide much-needed security and guidance for call takers, who may be concerned about their own risk and liability when assessing whether a call qualifies for an alternative response.

Build relationships between workforces. A healthy relationship between 911 call center staff — call takers and dispatchers — and alternative responders is essential to the success of any program. If 911 call center staff are unfamiliar with the capacity, responsibilities, and skills of alternative responders, call takers and dispatchers may be overly conservative in their decisions about when to assign calls to these responders. This relationship must be built through intentional steps, which can include: providing crisis responders with access to the call taker floor, embedding clinicians on the floor, and generally creating opportunities for responders, call takers and dispatchers to meet, get to know one another, and work together. Mutual understanding and exposure promote mutual trust.

Set up internal oversight. Don't fly blind. Regular review of response systems — including data tracking, after-action reviews, and formal ongoing opportunities for everyone with a role in response to convene and assess performance — is critical to building improved system response. For example, an alternative response system can be undermined if call takers simply forget to flag a call as eligible for alternative response, suggesting the need for periodic reminders or mandatory fields in the call classification system. Or, call-takers may be concerned about municipal liability or the risk to responders, and fail to utilize the alternative system without also dispatching a police response. It is important to gather and review program data on an ongoing basis in order to adjust training, processes, protocols, and other areas as needed.

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Additional Resources
Getting Started – Talking to Your Communities
Getting Started – Working With Data
Financing Alternative Response
Providing Service 24/7
The Policing of Social Conflict

Policing Project
NYU School of Law