

Community Responder Programs & How We Can Help

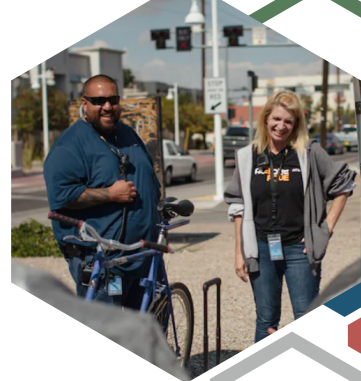
The term “community responders program” may be relatively new, but the concept of sending trained health professionals and community members as first responders has been around for decades.

Now, these programs are typically made up of mobile teams dispatched to provide immediate assistance to people experiencing mental illnesses, substance use, homelessness, and in need of other poverty-related support and de-escalation of minor disputes.

What They Do

Anyone who is experiencing—or is at risk of experiencing—a behavioral health crisis deserves appropriate, accessible, and high-quality care and support. Community responder teams approach their calls by exercising harm reduction, and with trauma-informed practices. These multidisciplinary teams are often trained in crisis de-escalation and intervention and can include medical staff (such as a nurse, medic), a behavioral health specialist, social worker, peer support specialist, harm reduction specialist, a mediator, or a trained community member.

Many programs not only work to de-escalate situations but also to connect people to essential services such as health care, mental health support, substance use treatment, shelters, or even basic living and hygienic items. These actions address systemic gaps in access and ensure no one is left behind.



Why Community Response

Americans often default to calling 911 whenever they experience an emergency or need assistance. While this can be an effective and convenient way to deploy first responders, community advocates have long argued that it too often results in police officers being dispatched to resolve situations better handled by health and social service professionals. Many communities, especially ones with large Black, Latino, and Native American populations, then find themselves over relying on police for behavioral health crises and social disturbances. Community responder programs, however, can help to bridge service gaps, provide immediate aid, and cultivate a resilient, interconnected community.

Starting One In Your Community

Community responder programs can be tailored to fit each community's needs. But it starts with first engaging trusted members of the community, existing first responders, and local service providers to understand these needs. Once identified, these groups can also help design the program and monitor its impact through ongoing data collection and transparent outcome reporting. This kind of all-hands community engagement helps ensure that service referrals are seamless and that the voices of the people who live in the community are prioritized.

How We Can Help

The Council of State Governments Justice Center launched a groundbreaking toolkit in 2021 to help communities establish community responder programs. The toolkit includes important considerations for successful implementation, as well as practical strategies and tips—all based on the experience and knowledge of our team and a coalition of existing programs. To learn more, visit csgjusticecenter.org/publications/expanding-first-response/

Included in the toolkit is also an assessment tool that jurisdictions can take to help determine where they are in planning, implementing, or sustaining their own program. After completing the tool, users receive a summary of their results and resources to aid in their progress or better amplify their success story.

Visit csgjusticecenter.org/publications/expanding-first-response/assessment-tool/ to take the assessment. Available in English and Spanish.

Photos courtesy of: Integral Care, Austin, TX; Behavioral Health 911 Diversion Program, Baltimore, MD

