



Justice Center
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

State Strategies to Strengthen Local Community Responder Programs

September 18, 2025

Presentation Agenda

- I. Welcome, Introductions, and Review of Expanding First Response Commission Recommendations
- II. Policy Solutions Grounded in Lived Experiences
- III. Panel Discussion with Expanding First Response: Scaling for States Commissioners
- IV. Q&A

The Council of State Governments Justice Center

We are a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that combines the power of a membership association, serving state officials in all three branches of government, with policy and research expertise to develop strategies that increase public safety and strengthen communities.

How We Work

- We bring people together
- We drive the criminal justice field forward with original research
- We build momentum for policy change
- We provide expert assistance

CSG Justice Center Community Responder Team

We support community and state transformation by providing research, resources, and technical assistance and through our team's range of professional and personal experiences. Our work envisions and promotes the development and integration of community responder programs within the first-response landscape through the following strategies:

- Publications, resources, toolkit
- Events and presentations
- Learning communities
- Technical assistance
- And more

Community Responder Program Definition

- Community responder programs offer an additional option for first response.
- Composed of multidisciplinary professionals trained to address behavioral health and quality-of-life concerns, community responder teams provide a person-centered response to 911 and other emergency calls for service.
- Integrating community responder programs into the first response landscape ensures that all calls for service can receive the most appropriate response.

The Expanding First Response Commission: Scaling for States

The 2025 Expanding First Response Commission had:

- 29 commissioners
- From 20 states and Washington, DC
- Elected officials, government administrators, emergency responders, medical providers, behavioral health providers, advocates, researchers, educators, faith leaders, people with lived experiences, and more

The Expanding First Response Commission: Scaling for States



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Reverend Dr. Charles F. Boyer
Co-founder, Salvation and Social Justice, Trenton, NJ



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The Expanding First Response Commission: Scaling for States



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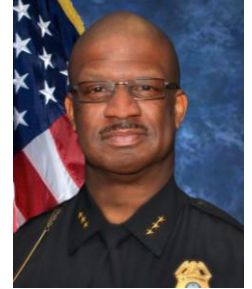
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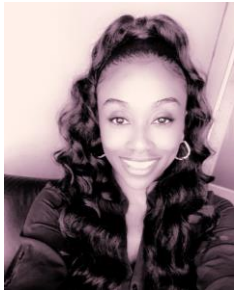
Sheriff Ed Gonzalez
Harris County Sheriff, TX



Sen. Keturah J. Herron
State Senator, Louisville, KY



Chief Anthony Holloway
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Rochester City Council, NY



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The Expanding First Response Commission: Scaling for States



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The Expanding First Response Commission's Recommendations for State Leaders

Strategies for States to Fund and Sustain Community Responder Programs

Anyone experiencing—or at risk of experiencing—a crisis related to behavioral health, homelessness, poverty, or other social needs deserves an immediate and appropriate response. That's why community responder programs, which employ health professionals and staff trained in crisis response as first responders, have emerged as an effective mechanism for reducing client distress, providing timely support, and reducing the burden on police and hospitals across the U.S. Now state leaders are looking to better understand how they can support what's working locally through legislation and financial investment.

State Support as a Building Block for Financial Sustainability

Emerging models often begin as pilot programs as communities determine whether the initiative meets their needs. But while pilot money is vital for establishing preliminary program infrastructure and collecting initial outcome data, communities can't rely solely on pilot funds for long-term sustainability. **Stable funding is critical to the sustainability** of any community responder program, whether it comes from state general funds, Medicaid, or a combination of multiple sources. These programs require resources for everything from equipment to staffing and training and need ongoing, reliable investments to ensure that the teams and work are supported.

State leaders are well-positioned to help community responder programs build long-term sustainability because they have the ability to support, standardize, and fund programs statewide, which makes it easier to implement and sustain them at the local level. This is crucial for expansion, meaningful community integration, and a stable workforce. When states invest in deliberate, continuous funding streams, they ensure all communities—regardless of geography or local resources—have a chance to maintain successful programs. State-wide investment also signals that community responder programs are a vital part of the broader first response system and should be implemented across the state.

Defining Community Responder Programs

With growing interest in these programs, the CSG Justice Center's **Expanding First Response Commission** set out to clarify their scope and intended impact. Over two weeks, these 29 experts worked together to establish the following definition:

Community responder programs offer an additional option for first response. Composed of multidisciplinary professionals trained to address behavioral health and quality-of-life concerns, community responder programs provide a person-centered response to 911 and other emergency calls for service. Integrating community responder programs into first response systems ensures that all calls for service can receive the most appropriate response.

Learn more in *Developing a Common Definition for Community Responder Programs*.

How States Can Help Strengthen the Community Responder Workforce

Community responder programs, which employ health professionals and staff trained in crisis response as first responders, have emerged as an effective mechanism for reducing client distress, providing timely support, and lessening the burden on police and hospitals across the U.S. As their expansion continues, it is increasingly important to ensure that training and workforce development opportunities are available so that community responder professionals have the tools they need to succeed long term. State leaders can use the following strategies to support what's working locally and help strengthen the workforce.

Building a Sustainable Workforce

One of the most important aspects of any community responder program is its ability to **hire, train, and retain front-line staff** who are well-suited for the work. Having a strong workforce ultimately allows community responder programs to serve their community members with a high level of expertise and reliability. Unfortunately, it's not always easy to build a sustainable workforce given challenges like **limited and unstable funding**, a lack of formal state-level training requirements and hiring practices, and compensation that is not always equal to traditional first responders. Liability protections that vary across states, and are sometimes unclear, also create barriers to recruitment when potential staff are concerned about whether they will be covered by the city or county's liability insurance.

State leaders are uniquely positioned to shore up a strong community responder workforce through efforts that standardize training requirements and liability protections statewide. They also have an opportunity to change the narrative on what makes a great responder by establishing policies that place value on lived experience and reducing hiring barriers around criminal records. With these standards in place, local programs can attract more desirable employment applicants and ensure staff receive ongoing, comprehensive training that better supports their workforce.

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How States Can Help Integrate Community Crisis Response into Local Dispatch Operations

Community responder programs, which employ health professionals and staff trained in crisis response as first responders, are growing across the country as an effective mechanism for reducing client distress, providing timely support, and reducing the burden on police and hospitals. But their ability to assist a person in crisis often begins with how integrated they are within local dispatch operations. Now, examples and strategies are emerging that can help state leaders support, fund, and scale up what is working.

The Importance of Building Well-Integrated Dispatch Procedures

Given the newness of many community responder programs, local officials must work closely with emergency call centers to expand call triage processes to include these teams as a first response option. Call taker involvement in this process can help ensure calls are properly screened, identified, and relayed, and that dispatchers, who play a vital role in first response, **have input on the protocols and procedures they will be using**. Dispatchers are often exposed to much of the same chaos and trauma that responders face in the field and have to make decisions just as quickly. Therefore, their buy-in is critical to making sure that community responders are directed to the right calls.

In some communities, community crisis response is added within existing 911 and emergency protocols. In others, it may be integrated into an existing crisis line or within the protocols for the **national 988 crisis number**. Regardless of which path is chosen, when community responder programs are **integrated into dispatch procedures**, call takers can more effectively obtain the necessary caller information and dispatch the most appropriate response to community members.

Even though dispatch operations are primarily developed locally, state leaders are well-positioned to support this work given their ability to bring state and local emergency response partners together and ensure operations are consistent statewide.

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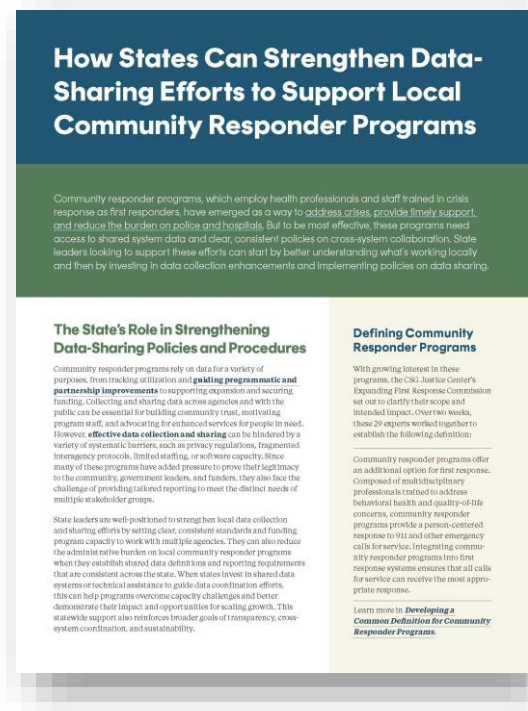
Funding and Sustainability

Workforce

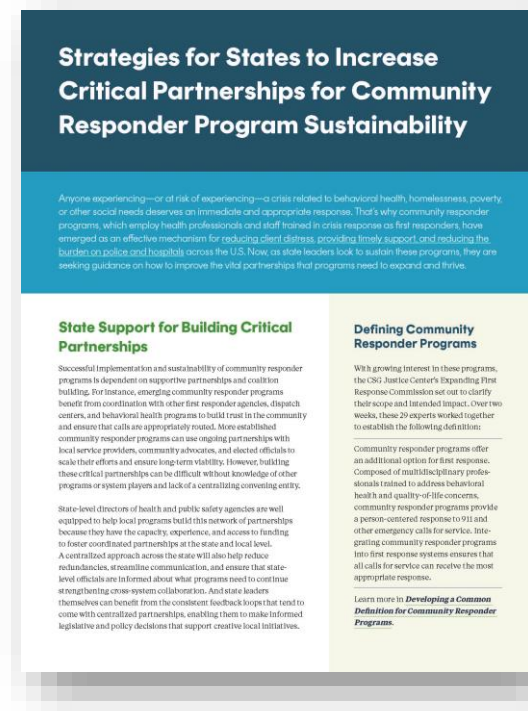
Dispatch

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/expanding-first-response/commission/>.

The Expanding First Response Commission's Recommendations for State Leaders



Data-Sharing



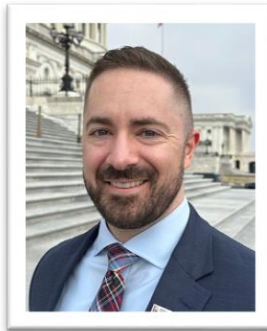
Partnerships

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/expanding-first-response/commission/>.

Today's Speakers



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Thank You!

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<https://csgjusticecenter.org/resources/newsletters/>

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