

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.

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***.

Three Things State Leaders Can Do to Help Successfully Integrate Community Crisis Response into Dispatch Operations

The **Expanding First Response Commission**—which includes advocates, first responders, policymakers, researchers, state and municipal officials, and people with other personal and professional experiences—met between January and March 2025 to develop actionable guidance for state leaders interested in supporting local community responder efforts. Below are three of their recommendations:



1. Bring emergency response stakeholders together.

Develop a statewide workgroup (or expand on an existing taskforce)—including representatives from fire departments, emergency medical services, law enforcement, dispatch, 988, and labor unions—to discuss 911, 988, and how community responder teams can fit into call triage protocols so the community can reach them no matter what number they call. The workgroup can also facilitate statewide resource mapping and discuss challenging topics such as call routing, liability questions, how to better centralize operations, and knowing what resources are available. They can also develop and support **standard triaging procedures** based on promising operations in other communities.



“Dispatchers need to be part of the conversation when determining how best to integrate community responder programs into their operations. We did this in Denver with the help of a licensed clinician who is now embedded as a manager in Denver 911. This leader is able to provide a new perspective on which calls need a different response and why.”

ANDREW DAMERON, Director of Emergency Communications for the City and County of Denver and Expanding First Response Commission member

2. Develop funding mechanisms that help sustain dispatch operations and support communities further refining their triage processes.

State leaders can pass legislation that funds expanded dispatch operations, for example, by allowing part of 911 emergency phone taxes to support dispatch of community responder teams. Grant opportunities for local community responder programs can also be established so that local leaders have the funding to develop ongoing training for dispatchers, educate the public about different emergency call line options, and build out data collection processes.

3. Pass legislation that classifies dispatchers as first responders and expands their opportunities for career benefits and job protection.

When expanding dispatch operations to include community responder teams, leaders must consider the additional layer of decision-making and training call takers will need to triage calls effectively. They should also be aware of liability concerns that dispatchers may have about sending a non-law enforcement team to address time-sensitive calls. For **a workforce that is already overworked and underpaid**, passing laws that allow call centers to offer more competitive salaries and liability protections, like that of other first responders, can help shore up their profession and attract and retain employees.



Justice Center
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS



**Expanding
First Response**