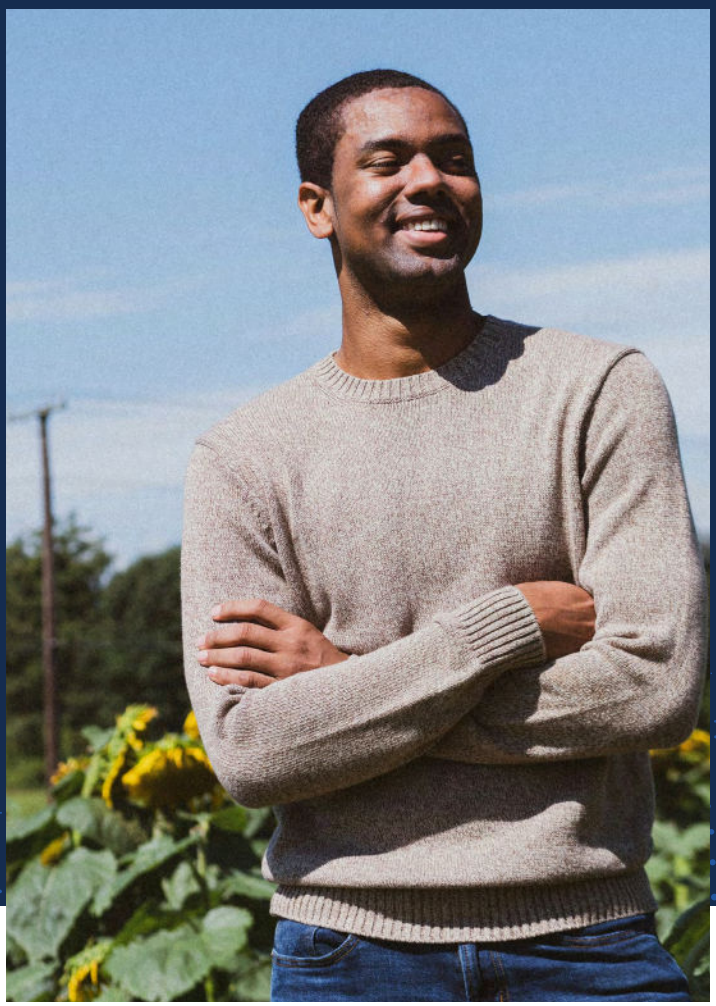
Center For
POLICING EQUITY

SPRING 2025 ELECTED LEADERS COUNCIL

Reflections on Advancing Community-Centered Public Safety

The Elected Leaders Council (ELC) is an initiative by the Center for Policing Equity (CPE) under the Unlocking Democracy program that brings together elected officials and their staff from across the nation to discuss community-centered approaches to public safety. This document highlights key reflections from meetings with the Spring 2025 ELC on what's driving success and what challenges remain.



What's Working: Lessons from Local Leaders

01 — Thinking Critically About Governmental Oversight of Safety Programs

ELC members emphasized the importance of thoughtfully considering which government or community entity should oversee and house community-centered safety programs. Jurisdictions have housed programs in a variety of places including, public safety, public health, fire and emergency medical services (EMS), the police department, and mayor's offices, as well as newly created local departments like community safety or crisis response agencies. In some cases, nonprofits have partnered with local governments and serve as the lead entity.

Some existing programs are actively reevaluating which entities are best suited to manage their programs in order to ensure long-term sustainability, adequate funding, and the collaboration necessary to support this work.

- One Northeastern community-responder program, currently housed within the public safety department, is exploring whether it would be more effective to operate under public health instead.
- A Midwestern program currently located in the mayor's office is considering shifting the program to another department like public health or fire to leverage different funding streams and interagency collaboration.

Local context should inform decisions. Communities are encouraged to conduct a community needs assessment and to intentionally engage their communities and local stakeholders to determine the most sustainable and collaborative structure for their programs.

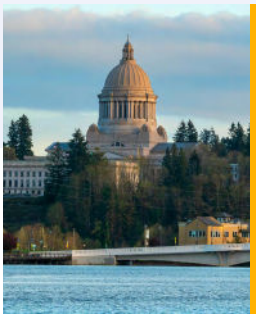
In 2022, the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts formally established the Community Safety Department in response to community concerns and a City Council policy order to create an unarmed alternative response program now known as the CARE (Community Assistance Response and Engagement) team. The CARE team responds to behavioral health crisis calls independently of the police.

Community Safety Department Publishes Inaugural Impact Report - City of Cambridge

02 — Leveraging Cross-Agency Collaboration

Successful community safety programs often rely on strong partnerships with traditional first responder departments like police, fire, and EMS. In many communities, first responders are cross-trained to serve multiple roles, for example, firefighters may receive cross-training so they can also serve as EMTs.

- A Midwestern program's past police chief is a licensed clinician, who is now the director of a healthcare organization and remains committed to crisis response efforts, promoting collaboration and coordination between the police, public health agencies, and community-based responders.
- A Northeastern program shared that their local police and fire department have been supportive of them from their inception, welcoming the opportunity for the program to remove mental health calls from their workload and recognizing the value in having people that are more trained in mental and behavioral health to respond to these calls. This has led to an effective collaboration, coordinated dispatch that ensures the right response, and ease with sharing data.
- CASE STUDY: CRU and Familiar Faces, Vera Institute of Justice



Olympia, Washington's Crisis Response Unit (CRU) demonstrates how cross-agency collaboration strengthens community safety by integrating behavioral health and outreach specialists within the police department to provide immediate crisis response and harm reduction services. CRU's Familiar Faces program builds on this model by focusing on long-term stability for frequent system users and now partners with a local hospital to strengthen medical support and care continuity.

Familiar Faces and Crisis Response Unit, Olympia WA

03 — Building Early and Ongoing Community Support through Messaging

ELC participants underscored the importance of crafting messaging that clearly communicated the value of investing in community-centered safety programs. Public outreach should highlight that all calls do not require an armed response and that community-based responder programs are evidence-based and operated by highly qualified individuals who are trained in behavioral health, assessment, de-escalation, and first response.

Community buy-in and trust is foundational to sustaining these programs and addressing the community's needs for a different type of response. For these programs to move forward, they also require buy-in from community leaders as part of this process, which includes traditional first responders like fire, EMS, and police.

One Northeastern program shared that research conducted by their task force showed that residents wanted an alternative to calling the police.

Now that their program is implemented, they are working to develop stronger messaging around stories, impact data, and dispatch integration metrics to demonstrate effectiveness. One story of impact shared by the Northeastern program is the success their community-responders have had with responding to calls at their local public library, a space that generates many calls for service. This success has led the program to being the primary first responders at the library after agreement from other first responders in the community that the community-responder team was most effective at leading responses in this space.

- Community Responder Programs: What They Are, How They Work, and Why They're Taking Off
- She Made the Right Call — A Mother's Bold Move That Changed Everything
- The Fifth Branch: A New Series from Tradeoffs

Challenges Identified by ELC Members

01 — Improving Dispatch Coordination

ELC members noted struggles with effectively routing calls and establishing triage and dispatch protocols. Dispatchers often need additional training and regular communication with new crisis response teams to ensure that calls are directed appropriately and that coordination challenges do not delay response times and program implementation.

- Conducting Emergency and Non-Emergency Call Triage
- Dispatching Community Responders to 911 Calls
- Community Responder Programs: Understanding the Call Triage Process
  - › Keys to Building a Strong Call Triage Process
- The Road to 988/911 Interoperability
- 911 Diversion & 988 Protocols - Baltimore Police Department

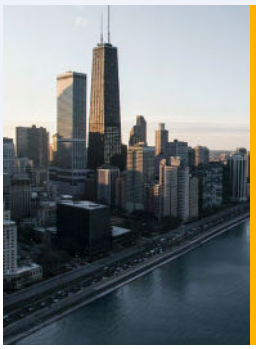
Albuquerque's Community Safety Department (ACS) has a coordinated dispatch system that routes non-violent, behavioral health-related 911 and 311 calls to specialized responders. By assigning specific call types and priority levels, dispatchers ensure that the right responders are sent to mid to low acuity situations. This structured yet flexible system enables timely and appropriate care while helping to reduce the burden on traditional emergency services.

Albuquerque Community Safety Department – Albuquerque, NM

02 — Strengthening Data Collection and Evaluation

Members of the ELC expressed a need for improved data collection and evaluation plans to measure their program's effectiveness and to inform program decision-making. As a program's structure and goals are often unique to the jurisdiction that they are implemented in, many programs in their beginning stages often struggle to determine which data and metrics are most useful to collect and most relevant to the local leaders who make decisions about funding and program sustainability.

- Using Data to Inform Decision Making - CSG Justice Center
- Essential Metrics for Alternative Emergency Response Programs (Harvard Kennedy School, Government Performance Lab)
- St. Petersburg CALL Evaluation
- Denver STAR Program
- City of Cambridge Community Safety Impact Report



Chicago's CARE pilot highlights how robust data collection and evaluation can strengthen community safety by informing program design and development and staffing. Through a partnership with the Chicago Health Lab, the city conducted an implementation evaluation that assessed program logistics, participant outcomes, and interagency collaboration, using the findings to identify challenges, improve practices, and lay the groundwork for future outcome evaluations. CARE's data-driven approach offers a valuable model for other cities developing crisis response programs rooted in evidence and continuous improvement.

Chicago CARE Evaluation

03 — Building and Sustaining Community and Political Support

Despite the community support behind many alternative response programs, some programs still face skepticism from their local leaders who question the ability of community-responder programs to handle calls typically designated for traditional first responders. Additionally, transitions in political leadership can make it difficult to sustain political momentum for alternative, community-centered response. In some cases, there is a lack of clear communication about how programs are structured and their intended outcomes.

04 — Addressing Workforce Strategies

A nationwide shortage of behavioral health professionals and first responder programs has created staffing challenges. This has resulted in some programs having trouble hiring enough staff to operate 24/7, limiting their reach and impact.

- Civilian Crisis Response: Staffing an Equitable Response
- Civilian Crisis Response: Pay Equity and Program Governance
- The Workforce For Non-Police Behavioral Health Crisis Response Doesn't Exist—We Need To Create It

05 — Securing Sustainable Funding

Funding streams to support community-centered safety strategies look different across the country, and the funding mechanisms being utilized in communities range from federal or philanthropic grants, billing to Medicaid, local or municipal operating funds, and state funding.

- One Northeastern program stated that broad local government budget constraints have put their program's funding at risk, with some political leaders considering cutting or reallocating resources away from community safety initiatives to cover shortfalls in other budget areas.
- A Midwestern program shared that they have faced challenges identifying viable policy pathways to reallocate funds from existing departments, like the police, to support community response efforts.

The difficulty of shifting resources between departments paired with overall funding constraints, continues to complicate efforts to build sustainable funding models for community responder programs.

For more information on securing sustainable funding, please visit the following resource: Financing Community Responder Programs - CSG Justice Center.

Additional Resources

- Redesigning Public Safety: Mental Health Emergency Response White Paper - Center for Policing Equity
- Mental Health Alternative First Response Community Roadmap - Center for Policing Equity