

NECP Spotlight:

Working With Public Partners In Emergency Responses

INTRODUCTION

Many first responder agencies are integrating public partners outside of their organizations -- such as mental health officials, clinicians, social workers, and others -- into responses for non-violent emergency calls involving domestic disputes, substance abuse, or mental health crises. The integration of new public partners alleviates strain on emergency communications resources by directing calls toward alternative personnel which decreases 911 call volume and includes more agencies across the public safety communications ecosystem. The National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP) highlights the importance of inclusive governance strategies and communications coordination in responding to emergency calls efficiently and effectively. The goal of inclusive governance focuses on expanding the partners involved in emergency communications governance structures beyond traditional first responders to bring their expertise and equities to these life saving missions. Programs that integrate public partners into emergency response help to support that goal. According to a Stanford study,¹ such programs have decreased arrests and escalations of violence in non-emergency responses. These programs can also help reduce call volume by proactively addressing issues which frees up traditional first responders for high-priority calls. Several methods are used, including dispatching specialist teams, law enforcement calling teams from on-site, over-the-phone assessments, and directing calls to community providers or hotlines.

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

Three counties, Fairfax (VA), Durham (NC), and Anne Arundel (MD), created programs incorporating public partners into their emergency responses. Fairfax County's programs are the Diversion First Program and its Co-Responder Team. Durham County has four pilot programs and a Crisis Call Diversion (CCD) program, and Anne Arundel County has a program called the Crisis Response System (CRS). In 2016, Fairfax County launched its Diversion First program, which seeks to divert individuals experiencing challenges from substance use or mental health issues to treatment services rather than arrest, as this is less expensive and addresses the root of individuals' problems. The program's Mobile Crisis Unit (MCU) is a team of specialists offering services ranging from domestic dispute mediation and substance abuse intervention to suicide survivor treatment planning and



psychiatric crisis evaluation. They operate proactively through referrals (which directs traffic away from 911 call centers) and assist traditional first responders on-site. In 2021, Fairfax County launched the Co-Responder Team program, consisting of police officers with crisis intervention training (CIT) and MCU staff, who are dispatched by 911 operators. While the latter program's results have not been published, the former and other Diversion First programs have led to a 28% decrease in the behavioral health population with misdemeanor charges in the county jail.

Durham County launched four pilot programs, with two similar to those in Fairfax, to address the findings of a study conducted in the county. The study² found that up to 90% of 911 calls are related to mental health, whether overt or underlying. Durham's other program, the Crisis Call Diversion (CCD) Program, places mental health officials in 911 call centers to assess and aid individuals over the phone. There is also a Care Navigation program that coordinates follow-ups within 48 hours for those who have met with first responders to connect the individual to community resources. The Anne Arundel County Crisis Response System (CRS) offers critical time intervention to help struggling individuals through transition periods. In-home intervention, which treats children with mental health issues while allowing them to live at home, and jail/hospital diversion programs provide individuals with community-based care alternatives to jail or strict hospital inpatient stays. To streamline access, the county created a 24-hour Crisis Warmline. In 2020, CRS was named the International Crisis Intervention Team of the year by Crisis Intervention Team International.³



NECP ALIGNMENT

The NECP emphasizes the benefit of involving non-traditional partners in supporting public safety to foster more inclusive governance and better adapt to the evolving needs of public safety agencies and the people they serve. It also highlights the importance of implementing technological and infrastructure systems that support the integration of such partners and promote the efficiency of emergency response. The following chart outlines specific NECP recommendations for integrating public partners into emergency response.

NECP Goal	Objective	Objective Description	Real World Example
Goal 1: Governance and Leadership	1.2	Structure more inclusive governance by expanding membership composition	Coordination with specialized public partners allows for more efficient use of resources and increases the accessibility of proactive, community-based solutions. For example, Anne Arundel County’s diversity of programs enables them to hone the best solutions for specific issues, such as alternatives to in-patient hospital care or in-home treatment for children with behavioral health challenges.
Goal 1: Governance and Leadership	1.3	Adopt adaptive governance strategies to address the rapid evolution of technologies, capabilities, and risks	These programs allow for adaptability by increasing the number and variety of resources on hand to deal with emergencies. Anne Arundel County’s “no wrong door policy” means that someone who connects with one of their resources has immediate access to all others. Additionally, the availability of multiple timelines for accessing resources (immediate, preemptive, and post-emergency) allows for help more tailored to the needs of individuals and more able to adapt to new circumstances.
Goal 4: Communications Coordination	4.2	Enhance coordination and effective usage of public safety communications resources at all levels of government	Coordination is critical in fostering efficiency. Durham County’s systems allow for the most efficient use of their resources by first allowing for problems to be addressed over the phone (through the CCD program), then sending a specialized team if needed, and finally following up to help solve problems. This system allows for more efficient use of traditional first responder infrastructure and helps prevent future emergencies.
Goal 5: Technology and Infrastructure	5.2	Ensure communications and information sharing systems meet public safety’s mission-critical needs	Directing calls and information to public partners increases capabilities to promptly respond to problems in the public partners’ fields. For example, the Mobile Crisis Unit (MCU) in Fairfax addresses the need to free up conventional first responders for dangerous, time-consuming calls, while the Co-Response Program eliminates the need for traditional first responders to call for the MCU from on-site.

RESOURCES

Through coordination with specialized public partners, first responders are now better able to meet the needs of the people they serve, through more efficient use of resources and increasing the accessibility of proactive, community-based solutions. To learn more, visit: cisa.gov/necp.

These new strategies correspond to the NECP mission of developing and strengthening effective emergency communication methods in emergency situations. Want to share your organization’s successes and alignment to the NECP? Email us at: necp@cisa.dhs.gov.

1Crawford, K. (2022, June 8). Stanford study shows benefits to reinventing 911 responses. Stanford News. Retrieved August 22, 2022, from <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/06/08/stanford-study-shows-benefits-reinventing-911-responses>

2Kanowitz, S. (2022, June 29). When 911 calls require a mental health response. GCN. Retrieved August 22, 2022, from <https://gcn.com/public-safety/2022/06/when-911-calls-require-mental-health-response/368637>

3Mann, A. (2020, July 13). Anne Arundel Police Crisis Response Team named best ‘on the planet’. Capital Gazette. Retrieved October 4, 2022, from <https://www.capitalgazette.com/news/ac-cn-crisis-response-team-award-20200713-nx4ajblzujgd5p4mwqorl6tnmi-story.html>