



Selecting 911 Calls for Alternative Emergency Response

Lessons from Long Beach, California

Author: Aloka Narayanan

Contributors: Gabriela Solis and Christi Economy

CASE STUDY



HARVARD Kennedy School
Government Performance Lab



Across the country, local government leaders are grappling with how to identify which calls coming in to their 911 systems are both safe and suitable for an alternative emergency response team to effectively handle. Jurisdictions may receive tens or hundreds of thousands of calls each year but do not know which calls can be safely diverted to unarmed responders. This case study outlines the approach taken by Long Beach, California, with the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab's support, in selecting appropriate 911 calls for alternative unarmed emergency response. It offers lessons to governments considering new approaches to crisis response that reduce reliance on traditional law enforcement and those that are facing a key decision point: selecting 911 calls that are safe and suitable for an alternative response team to effectively handle.

Introduction

As a result of rising demand for a more holistic approach to public safety, governments are considering new ways to provide individuals with effective support while freeing up law enforcement resources. Alternative emergency response systems allow communities to provide a wider array of services to their residents, including mental and behavioral health services, substance use treatment, and other forms of support. The Government Performance Lab (GPL) has provided technical assistance through Alternative 911 Emergency Response Implementation Cohorts to [nine jurisdictions](#), supporting their work to reshape emergency response systems over the course of 12 to 18 months.

Long Beach, California, a member of the 2021-2022 cohort, responded to community demands for a needs assessment and public engagement process culminating in a [Racial Equity and Reconciliation Initiative Report](#), allocating more than \$750,000 of American Rescue Plan Act funds to launch an alternative response system. The city created the Community Crisis Response (CCR) Workgroup, led by project managers from the city's Office of Equity and the Department of Health and Human Services and composed of representatives from various city departments, to recommend a model for the program

Crisis response in Long Beach at a glance

Population Size: 466,742

Led by: City Manager's Office + Department of Health and Human Services; program recommendations produced by city staff-led Community Crisis Response (CCR) inter-agency workgroup

Program Description: Non-law enforcement teams responding to non-violent, non-criminal, non-emergency calls for service involving mental health crises

that would be responsive to community demands.¹ As stakeholders set out to implement an alternative emergency response system, they faced a common planning challenge: **how to identify which calls coming in to the 911 system are both safe and suitable for an alternative response team to effectively handle.**

Through the Alternative 911 Emergency Response Implementation Cohort, the GPL assisted workgroup members in Long Beach to make recommendations to the City Manager about the types of calls to divert from traditional emergency responders. Long Beach used a data-driven approach focused on outcomes of actual 911 calls and facilitated shared decision-making in the interdisciplinary CCR Workgroup to help stakeholders overcome fears about the public safety risks of introducing unarmed first responder teams. Simplifying the call analysis approach to focus on actual call scenarios and dispositions effectively unlocked a discussion that workgroup members had been engaging in for months. It took just four weeks to complete the following five steps in the call selection process:²

1. Identify potential 911 call scenarios suitable for alternative response and match them to dispatch call codes
2. Collect and analyze dispatch data to determine the volume, nature, and outcomes of different 911 call codes
3. Develop criteria to ensure 911 calls that pose a safety risk do not receive an alternative response
4. Categorize data by call code and disposition to recommend call categories appropriate for alternative response
5. Engage with community members for feedback on call recommendations and more

1. Departments represented: City Manager's Office, City Prosecutor's Office, Disaster Preparedness & Emergency Communications, Fire Department, Health and Human Services, Library Services, Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, Police Department.

2. The Long Beach alternative emergency response initiative is called "Community Crisis Response." Jurisdictions may describe similar efforts using different terminology. Community Crisis Response, or CCR, is used interchangeably with "alternative emergency response" and "alternative response," GPL nomenclature, in this document.

Five steps for completing call analysis in Long Beach

1. Identify potential 911 call scenarios suitable for alternative response and match them to dispatch call codes

While call-takers and dispatchers for 911 use call codes, also known as nature codes, to categorize situations and potential responses in shorthand, these can be difficult to understand for other stakeholders unfamiliar with the 911 response system. For example, in Long Beach, UNWELC denotes an unwelcome guest, which includes loitering. When decision-makers have varying levels of familiarity with call codes, it can be helpful to first identify scenarios for which alternative response may be appropriate before matching these to call codes for analysis. A single call code can encompass a range of scenarios with varying risk levels, and scenario discussions can help identify situations within the call code that can be resolved by non-law enforcement entities. The GPL assisted the Long Beach project managers to run an interactive exercise, during which workgroup members populated a shared document with scenarios for which they felt law enforcement response was inappropriate, ineffective, or unnecessary based on their experiences with the emergency response system. By discussing scenarios instead of call codes, workgroup members without a background in 911 dispatch were able to envision what unarmed response can look like in the field, while workgroup members with an understanding could more easily move beyond high-risk scenarios. GPL staff drew from an exercise spearheaded by [Durham, NC](#), asking workgroup members to respond to the following prompts:

- If you are or have been a first responder, describe a time when you responded to a call for service but felt like someone else could have helped the person better.
- If you are a service provider, describe a time when one of your clients needed support and you/they did not know whom to call.
- For everyone, describe a time you wanted to get a community member help, but you did not think police, fire, or EMS were the best people to call.

Scenarios that surfaced from this exercise included someone intoxicated inside a library, family members getting into an argument at a gathering, neighbor complaints about loud music, and an unhoused person yelling on the street. The city's 911 dispatch coordinator and GPL staff then matched potential call codes to the scenarios that arose during the brainstorm.

Call codes identified by the 911 dispatcher with descriptions:

- 929A: Attempted suicide
- 5150: Mental health crisis (non-violent)
- 647F: Public intoxication
- 647FD: Public intoxication on drugs
- GROUP: Group disturbance
- FAMILY: Family disturbance
- DISPUT: Dispute
- NEIGHB: Neighbor disturbance
- JUVE: Juvenile disturbance
- CKWEL: Check the well being
- UNWELC: Unwelcome guest

The figure below demonstrates how the shared document was structured:

Shared Document Table Example		
Initials	Scenario Description	Possible Codes
EL	Calls involving loitering, namely those involving young folks.	UNWELC /GROUP / JUVE

Initials of the workgroup member who came up with the scenario

Workgroup member's description of a situation

Input from dispatch coordinator - potential call codes the scenario could fit

By matching scenarios to actual call codes, staff were then set up to pull historical 911 call data recorded by call code from the city's computer aided dispatch (CAD) system to determine which types of calls might be most appropriate for an alternative response.

2. Collect and analyze dispatch data to determine the volume, nature, and outcomes of different 911 call codes

Data—including the proportion of calls by call code resulting in criminal justice-related outcomes, the proportion of calls by call code that were deemed high priority, and the overall volume of calls by call code—typically contained in the CAD system are especially helpful for determining whether calls coded as such can be safely and appropriately addressed by non-law enforcement entities. The 911 dispatch coordinator in Long Beach worked with GPL staff to answer the questions in the table below for the workgroup. See step four for what was ultimately presented to workgroup members.

The outcome of 911 calls, also known as “dispositions,” were particularly useful for the Long Beach team as an indicator of appropriateness for alternative response. For example, calls that resulted in non-criminal justice-related dispositions, as determined by the 911 dispatch coordinator—such as a disposition that the officer “assisted citizen” or “left a note”—indicated these calls could have been handled by an alternative response team rather than traditional law enforcement. Criminal justice-related dispositions, however, like “booked and filed,” signaled a traditional law enforcement response that may not be appropriate for alternative response.

As outlined in step four, the workgroup ultimately used this information to inform which categories of calls *generally* could be appropriate for a non-police response.

Question	Data point	How is this helpful?
How often are calls in these call codes ending in criminal justice-related outcomes?	% calls by disposition	Calls that tend to be resolved outside of the criminal legal system—e.g., without an arrest, citation, etc.—signal appropriateness for alternative response
How often are calls assigned high priority?	% calls by priority	Lower priority means not as urgent and does not necessarily need a police response
How long does it take for officers to respond to these calls?	Average on-scene response time	Longer response time signals it may be a lower urgency call
When is the highest volume of calls coming in?	# calls by hour of the day and day of the week	Defines higher-need times when alternative response teams should be available during the pilot
Where is the highest volume of calls coming from?	# of calls by geographic region	Defines higher-need areas to focus on during the pilot

3. Develop criteria to ensure 911 calls that pose a safety risk do not receive an alternative response

Call codes are broad call classifications, so additional criteria are often used by 911 call-takers and dispatchers to parse call details and identify the right team to respond. To increase confidence that certain calls are appropriate for alternative response, the workgroup drew on dispatcher and first responder knowledge about on-scene situations to develop a set of exclusionary criteria to render 911 calls that pose a safety risk to the person in need of support and/or responders ineligible for alternative response. The group analyzed exclusion criteria used by other jurisdictions piloting alternative response programs. In Albuquerque, NM and Harris County, TX, for example, an indication during a 911 call of intent to use weapons or violence automatically excluded those calls from alternative response.

After selecting the exclusionary criteria, the workgroup used the scenarios discussed during step two to test the exclusionary criteria and come up with additional suggestions to signal appropriateness for unarmed teams. The final list of recommendations for the criteria to determine which calls should be excluded from alternative response included calls that:

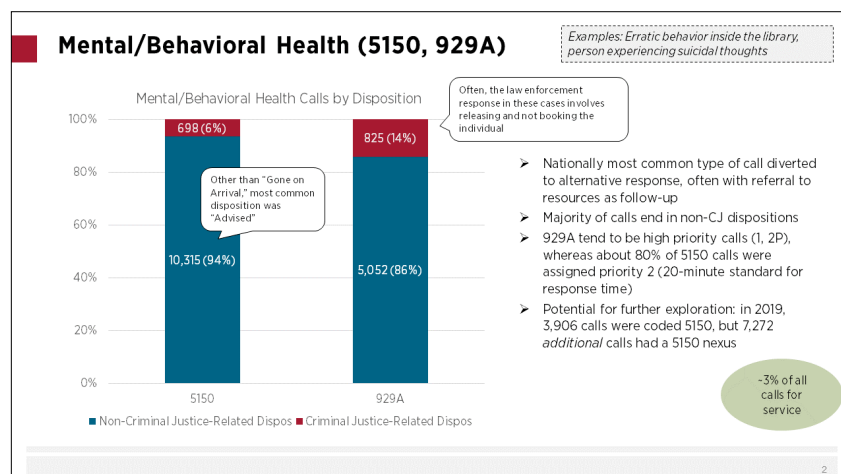
- Are designated “Priority 1,” which typically means an urgent situation is in progress
- Report a person is exhibiting violent behavior
- Report a person is in possession of a weapon
- Report a person is experiencing a medical emergency
- Report a person is threatening to hurt themselves or others, or is at imminent risk of doing so
- Report a person has committed a crime

Exclusionary criteria recommendations would be presented alongside call code recommendations to city leadership prior to integration into call-taking protocols by 911 call center staff.

4. Categorize data by call code and disposition to recommend call categories appropriate for alternative response

Presenting a 911 call data analysis, outlined in step two, in organized and accessible graphics and language enables decision-making by all individuals involved, regardless of their familiarity with the data and terminology of 911 and CAD systems. To facilitate readability, GPL staff created slides for the workgroup showing how many calls by call code ended up in a criminal justice-related disposition. On the slides, call code data are organized into four categories: mental/behavioral health, public intoxication, disturbances, and welfare checks. Recall from step two that data points deemed impactful for decision-making included call volume, call outcomes or dispositions, and priority, among others.

Below is a sample slide from the workgroup that shows analysis for mental/behavioral health call categories, which are identified as call codes 5150 and 929A. Most of these calls—over 85%—resulted in a non-criminal justice-related disposition. In these cases, where officers showed up and did not arrest or cite anyone, the workgroup generally agreed that someone other than law enforcement could have effectively handled the call, understanding that the calls for which law enforcement might be needed would be very likely caught by the 911 call-takers when they vetted the calls with the exclusionary criteria identified in step three.



After going through call categories by disposition, the project managers administered a “Calls for Service Pulse Check” survey, informed by similar work in Durham, NC, for workgroup members to gauge in real time their aggregated recommendations for alternative response. The survey asked, “Assuming an appropriate risk assessment using the agreed upon exclusionary criteria, how confident are you in sending trained unarmed responders to the following call categories?” Workgroup members could choose responses ranging from “not at all confident” to “very confident” for the four call categories (mental/behavioral health, public intoxication, disturbances, and welfare checks). This real-time feedback during a workgroup meeting allowed for discussions about remaining public safety concerns and coalescing on recommendations and potential phasing of alternative response teams.

More tips for successful call selection

1. **Consider additional data points to identify calls for alternative response:** Governments should use multiple pathways for recommending calls if possible, including reviewing case narratives and/or call recordings from 911 calls to confirm appropriateness of calls and identify additional calls eligible for alternative response, as well as conducting community engagement sessions. If data are available, assault on one or more officers on scene and the percent of calls with no on-scene response can also help jurisdictions understand the potential safety risks of calls.
2. **Ensure the right partners are in the room:** Individuals with knowledge of the 911 call-taking and dispatch process and those with information about what first responders currently face on scene can be especially helpful partners to include in the call identification process, providing much needed context. In Long Beach, the project managers reached out to relevant stakeholders prior to meetings to ensure they would be in attendance and sent agendas in advance so members knew what to expect. Governments should also strongly consider involving community members in planning workgroups to ensure their representation in decision-making.
3. **Consider a phased approach to implementation:** Because there is more evidence on mental and behavioral health calls being successfully addressed by alternative response teams than other types of calls (e.g., disputes), it may be easier for a diverse group of stakeholders to agree to pilot with these calls. Governments should consider adding calls to the alternative response teams’ responsibilities once they review data to confirm successes and teams feel more comfortable navigating the community and its resources. Harris County, TX, and Long Beach are testing their alternative response programs with a few call codes to start and plan to add more in subsequent phases of implementation, beginning a few months in.

5. Engage with community members for feedback on call recommendations and more

Community engagement early and often in developing alternative response initiatives ensures programs are responsive to community needs and facilitates trust in government-led programming. Once the workgroup completed the call code and exclusionary criteria selection, and presented to and received approval on recommendations from city leadership, they went back to community members. Via town hall meetings and focus groups, the workgroup informed the public of their progress and gathered feedback on expectations for and needs from the unarmed response team, proposed call categories, exclusionary criteria, and team composition. They also used these community conversations to identify additional stakeholders to include in the community engagement process and to build relationships with service providers. The three key goals of the community engagement process, which ran from February through July 2022, included:

- Providing a feedback loop for individuals involved in creating the Racial Equity and Reconciliation Initiative Report
- Informing the community of the work completed by the workgroup
- Incorporating community feedback into recommendations for next steps

The workgroup incorporated community members' input by changing the overall name of the program (from Alternate Crisis Response to Community Crisis Response), selecting the geographic boundaries of the pilot, identifying neighborhood organizations and service provider partners, and adding training components to team operations. Community engagement has also built momentum and public support for the program and will likely benefit public education efforts moving forward.

Conclusion

By following these five steps, Long Beach was able to integrate the community-led demand for a range of alternative response options with resource constraints and public safety priorities. Using an evidence-informed approach to analyze call data and outcomes, CCR Workgroup members addressed concerns about the safety of unarmed responder teams and developed informed next steps in their alternative emergency response implementation process, including how to staff and train teams and where to geographically launch first.

In addition to supporting jurisdictions, like Long Beach, through the Alternative 911 Emergency Response Implementation Cohort, the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) also runs a Community of Practice, which is free and open to any government staff working to plan and implement alternative emergency response teams. The Community of Practice convenes more than 50 governments across the country monthly to present on different phases of the alternative emergency response implementation process, share lessons learned from other jurisdictions undertaking this work, discuss tools and tactics, and hear from guest speakers with experience in alternative emergency response. To get involved with the Community of Practice, [visit the GPL's website](#).

The [Government Performance Lab](#), housed at the Harvard Kennedy School Taubman Center for State and Local Government, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

©Copyright 2022 Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab.