



Alternative Emergency Response Program Development Checklist

Authors: **Marianna Yamamoto and Gabriela Solis Torres**

Contributors: **Ben Appleton, Emily Audet, and Aloka Narayanan**

The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) has supported 32 jurisdictions to establish or expand [alternative 911 emergency response programs](#), which have the potential to connect individuals in crisis to teams of unarmed responders trained to de-escalate situations and connect individuals to community-based services. Often, when we begin our work in a jurisdiction, program staff can feel overwhelmed with the task at hand. We frequently hear questions like, “Where do I start?” and “What steps do I need to plan for?” From our work over the past four years, the GPL has identified common steps that jurisdictions typically take to build the foundations of an alternative response program.

This tool provides an **operational checklist** of these tasks, which program managers and other staff can use to guide their work and assess their progress. It includes 26 steps toward program development, which are organized into eight sections based on relevant stakeholders for each one: operational strategy and vision, community and stakeholder engagement, sustainability, data collection and evaluation, communications, equipment and capital needs, staffing and capacity building, and dispatch. This list is not exhaustive and will be updated as more jurisdictions implement alternative response programs.



Overview: Alternative Response Program Development Checklist



Operational Strategy and Vision

Develop a clear vision

Build internal partnerships for implementation

Plan a strategic timeline

Determine the initial scope of operations



Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Assemble a working group to plan and direct program development

Establish a community advisory board to guide program development

Create a community engagement plan



Sustainability

Build a budget

Create a sustainability plan

Create an expansion plan



Data Collection and Evaluation

Establish data partners and agreements

Develop a data collection plan for performance management

Create a quality assurance plan for program operations



Communications

Establish an operations communications plan

Develop a public messaging plan



Equipment and Capital Needs

Secure staff offices and headquarters

Procure initial equipment

Finalize equipment procurement



Staffing and Capacity Building

Release an RFP and select a vendor (if applicable)

Build a strong responder team

Develop a team training plan

Create team protocols

Compile service referral lists and pathways



Dispatch

Select eligible call types and exclusionary criteria

Develop and implement new dispatch protocol

Deliver new dispatch training

Key

Early program development

Mid-program development

Late program development

Who Should Use This Tool?

The full tool will be most useful for program managers and staff charged with spearheading the development of an alternative response program. Consequently, it will likely be most helpful in jurisdictions that have decided to create a program and have taken the necessary initial steps toward program development, including passing authorizing legislation, allocating an initial budget for a pilot program, and identifying staff to lead program development. However, policymakers and practitioners exploring alternative response can use this tool to anticipate key steps in program development, and practitioners in jurisdictions already running these programs can use this tool to validate their program's development.

How Should I Use It?

We have seen alternative response program managers and staff use this checklist successfully in multiple ways. Some keep the checklist format and use it as a high-level progress tracker. Others transfer the checklist into their preferred project management software and assign tasks to their staff. We encourage you to adapt this tool to fit your team's needs and working style. Similarly, while this tool outlines common tasks, you will likely have to customize this checklist based on your unique program and jurisdiction characteristics. In general, we have seen it be helpful for program managers to refer to this checklist once a week throughout program development.

What Order Should I Go In?

Tasks are coded by whether they typically come in the early, middle, or late stages of program development. These timing indicators serve as guideposts, but the timing in which you complete tasks may differ. Additionally, you can and should make progress on many of these steps simultaneously, and you will likely benefit from revisiting and refining tasks once you have more information.

We recommend that you **begin with the initial operational strategy and vision tasks**: develop a clear vision, build internal partnerships, and plan a strategic timeline. This information will help you make smart decisions on other program considerations that align with your core goals. For example, a clear strategy and vision can enable you to choose strategic performance indicators that will help your program measure whether you are fulfilling your goals. Additionally, you should **include stakeholder and community engagement throughout program development and operation** to incorporate these perspectives in key programmatic decisions.

Program Development Checklist

This tool is organized into eight sections:

- [Operational Strategy and Vision](#)
- [Community and Stakeholder Engagement](#)
- [Sustainability](#)
- [Data Collection and Evaluation](#)
- [Communications](#)
- [Equipment and Capital Needs](#)
- [Staffing and Capacity Building](#)
- [Dispatch](#)

Each section includes the **key stakeholders** to engage in decision-making, and **program development tasks and sub-tasks**. Tasks are color-coded by their timing in the implementation process. Some sections include **additional resources** to guide program planning.



Operational Strategy and Vision

Key stakeholders: Local policymakers; community groups; 911 call center; emergency medical services (EMS), fire, and police departments; public health department; human services department

Early program development	Develop a clear vision	Status:
	<p>Develop a program mission that states the future you are working toward.</p> <p>Establish program goals and objectives that align with your mission and can be tracked using data.</p>	
	Build internal partnerships for implementation	Status:
	<p>Identify and strengthen relationships with agencies that may need to be involved in the different planning, implementation, and launch phases. These partnerships may include the 911 director and behavioral health commissioner, for example (see Community and Stakeholder Engagement for guidance on other collaborators and stakeholders).</p> <p>Draft and sign memoranda of understanding with these agencies. This step may include data-sharing agreements (see "Establish data partners and agreements" in Data Collection and Evaluation for more specific information on data-focused partnerships).</p> <p>Set expectations for how you will engage your key operational partners during program development and operation.</p>	
Mid-program development	Plan a strategic timeline	Status:
	<p>Select the pilot launch date.</p> <p>Identify all key milestones that must be achieved (you can use this tool as a resource) and assign them a target date for completion. It is often helpful to think about what external approvals are required and work backward from these decision points. Identify typical procurement cycle times and incorporate that into the timeline, if needed.</p> <p>Set a goal timeline for expansion.</p>	
	Decide the initial scope of operations	Status:
	<p>Decide whether to host the alternative response team within a government agency or contract services through a social service provider.</p> <p>Identify the host department or agency that will house the team or manage the contract with the service provider (see Staffing and Capacity Building for more information).</p> <p>Analyze 911 calls for service by geography and time of day and week.</p> <p>Identify geographic areas that could benefit most from the program based on community needs. Make full use of existing reports and community advocacy, and conduct additional community engagement and a community needs assessment as needed (see Community and Stakeholder Engagement).</p> <p>Select the pilot location and hours of operation based on the call analysis and community engagement (see tasks above), as well as program capacity.</p> <p>After identifying a pilot region, build local partnerships.</p>	



Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Key stakeholders: Community groups; community members; subject matter experts; local policymakers; vendor (if applicable); 911 call center; EMS, fire, and police departments

Resources:

- Vera's [Civilian Crisis Response](#) toolkit — Chapters on [Program planning and community collaboration](#) and [Ongoing oversight for a community-driven program](#)

Early program development	Assemble a working group to plan and direct program development	Status:
	<p>Identify individuals to serve on the working group, like 911 directors, program managers, and representatives from the mayor's office, fire department, and police department.</p> <p>Set the working group's purpose and objectives.</p> <p>Establish roles, responsibilities, and expectations for participation, including the meeting cadence.</p> <p>Determine the decision-making process and authority.</p>	
	Establish a community advisory board to guide program development	Status:
	<p>Define the goals and objectives for a community advisory board based on your program goals and mission.</p> <p>Establish roles, responsibilities, and expectations for participation, including the meeting cadence.</p> <p>Decide how many members should have direct, lived expertise and how many should have educational/professional expertise.</p> <p>Determine and execute outreach strategies to recruit community advisory board members. Members may include behavioral health professionals, leaders of community-based organizations, individuals with experiences of behavioral health challenges, and advocacy leaders.</p>	
Mid-program development	Create a community engagement plan	Status:
	<p>Establish the goals and objectives for community engagement, based on your program goals and mission.</p> <p>Identify new and existing forums for community engagement.</p> <p>Develop outreach and education strategies to reach target populations, including the cadence for community engagement.</p> <p>Implement specific strategies to engage residents after they have been served by the alternative response program.</p> <p>Develop a strategy to continually integrate community engagement insights into program operations (See Data Collection and Evaluation).</p>	



Sustainability

Key stakeholders: Vendor (if applicable); 911 call center; EMS, fire, and police departments; local policymakers; community groups

Resources:

- The Council of State Governments Justice Center's [Community-Driven Crisis Response](#) workbook — Section on financial sustainability

Early program development	Build a budget	Status:
	<p>Research and estimate:</p> <p>Equipment costs (see Equipment and Capital Needs).</p> <p>Personnel costs (see Staffing and Capacity Building).</p> <p>Staff training costs (see Staffing and Capacity Building).</p> <p>Communication costs (see Communications).</p> <p>Community and stakeholder engagement costs, including stipends/benefits (e.g., child care) for the community advisory board (see Community and Stakeholder Engagement).</p> <p>Overhead costs, like insurance for staff.</p> <p>The cost of opportunities for additional impact, such as expanded service areas and times.</p>	
Mid-development	Create a sustainability plan	Status:
	<p>Research and attain funding for pilot sustainability.</p> <p>Track key data to inform pilot sustainability, like call volume, responder safety, foregone opportunities (see Data Collection and Evaluation and the Essential Metrics for Alternative Emergency Response Programs tool).</p> <p>Select a cadence for reviewing program data to determine if the pilot is meeting its goals and objectives.</p>	
Late program development	Create an expansion plan	Status:
	<p>Research and identify funding sources for pilot expansion.</p> <p>Track key data to inform pilot expansion, including foregone opportunities for the alternative response team to answer additional appropriate calls (for further guidance, see Essential Metrics for Alternative Emergency Response Programs, p. 4).</p> <p>Select a cadence for reviewing expansion opportunities.</p> <p>Deepen relationships with partners and stakeholders to facilitate program expansion.</p>	



Data Collection and Evaluation

Key stakeholders: Vendor (if applicable); 911 call center; EMS, fire, and police departments; information technology department; data analysts

Resources:

- The GPL's [Essential Metrics for Alternative Emergency Response Programs](#) tool

Early program development	Establish data partners and agreements	Status:
	<p>Identify data sources, like 911 and alternative response dispatch systems, the alternative response team case management system, and law enforcement.</p> <p>Identify and build relationships with the specific individuals who will be collecting and analyzing data. These individuals will likely work in multiple different offices.</p> <p>Establish cross-departmental data-sharing agreements and expectations.</p>	
	Develop a data collection plan for performance management	Status:
	<p>Establish key performance metrics that enable you to track stated program goals (see Essential Metrics for Alternative Emergency Response Programs for a list of 29 common, actionable metrics).</p> <p>Collect and understand baseline data.</p> <p>Build and implement data collection policies and protocols for 911, law enforcement, and the alternative response contractor (if applicable) or government agency, including data collection roles and responsibilities.</p> <p>Develop a process and cadence for reviewing data and integrating the insights into program management</p> <p>Create and implement a qualitative data collection plan for feedback from the community and clients.</p> <p>Develop a plan for program evaluation, including finding an evaluation partner, determining key evaluation questions, and establishing data-sharing agreements. If you are interested in the evaluation of alternative emergency response programs, please contact us at govlab@hks.harvard.edu.</p>	
Late development	Create a quality assurance plan for program operations	Status:
	<p>Choose quality assurance processes for assessing fidelity to the program design, such as randomly selecting eligible 911 calls to determine if the call was correctly triaged.</p> <p>Identify additional quality assurance data sources and stakeholders, as needed, like 911 center managers, responder team operation managers, or responder team clinical managers.</p> <p>Establish quality assurance processes, roles, and responsibilities for 911, law enforcement, and the alternative response contractor (if applicable) or government agency, such as identifying challenges to troubleshoot and coordinating action plans to address them.</p>	



Communications

Key stakeholders: Vendor (if applicable); community groups; community members; 911 call center; EMS, fire, and police departments; local policymakers; staff unions; legal department

Early program development	Establish an operations communications plan	Status:
	<p>Identify agency/department leaders, elected officials, and other affected stakeholders who require ongoing communication about internal program operations, like the 911 director, EMS/fire/police chiefs or directors, mayor's office, and behavioral health commissioners.</p> <p>Set clear goals for communication touch points with each stakeholder group.</p> <p>Determine the roles, responsibilities, and cadence for communicating with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected officials. Operations leadership. Line staff (e.g., from 911, service providers, EMS/fire/police departments). Staff unions. Legal department. Other affected stakeholders: 	
Late program development	Develop a public messaging plan	Status:
	<p>Determine the program name.</p> <p>Decide on program branding and create a branding guide.</p> <p>Identify key media partners.</p> <p>Write talking points.</p> <p>Develop a communications/social media toolkit.</p> <p>Train program leaders and key partners on communications and messaging.</p> <p>Create and publish a public website(s).</p> <p>Establish and implement a plan to share data with the public, including the cadence and structure (e.g., dashboard, newsletter). For example, the Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Teams (HEART) in Durham, NC, manages a public data dashboard.</p>	



Equipment and Capital Needs

Key stakeholders: Vendor (if applicable); 911 call center; EMS, fire, and police departments; procurement office

Early program development	Secure staff offices and headquarters	Status:
	Identify and attain location(s) for physical office(s) for programmatic and response staff. Determine and purchase staff office needs. Common needs include computers, stationary equipment, and other office materials.	
	Procure initial equipment	Status:
	Research, budget, and select: Vehicles , including necessary customizations, if any. Dispatch (e.g., radios, MDTs) and communications equipment (e.g., cell phones, laptops, tablets). Data collection and case management software.	
Late development	Finalize equipment procurement	Status:
	Research, budget, and select: Team uniforms. Necessary supplies for service delivery (e.g., food, blankets, water, other resources for basic needs). Develop and implement a process for tracking and ordering new supplies.	



Staffing and Capacity Building

Key stakeholders: Vendor and procurement office (if applicable); 911 call center; EMS, fire, and police departments; local service providers

Resources:

- The GPL's [guidebook on Crafting a Results-Driven Request for Proposals \(RFP\)](#)
- The GPL [Procurement Excellence Network's Resource Library](#)
- Vera's [Civilian Crisis Response](#) toolkit — Chapters on [Staffing an equitable response](#) and [Pay equity and program governance](#)

Mid-program development	Release an RFP and select a vendor (if applicable)	Status:
	<p>Draft a request for proposals (RFP) and solicit input from key partners (see Community and Stakeholder Engagement). For example, Allegheny County, PA, a member of the GPL's Alternative 911 Emergency Response Implementation Cohort, released an RFP to staff and run their pilot program.</p> <p>Release the RFP.</p> <p>Form and convene an evaluation committee.</p> <p>Hold an RFP pre-bid conference and office hours.</p> <p>Evaluate and score RFP responses. See the Procurement Excellence Network's how-to guides on proposal evaluation and evaluation scorecards.</p> <p>Select a vendor.</p> <p>Execute a contract with a vendor.</p> <p>Use results-driven contract management strategies throughout the contract period.</p>	
	Build a strong responder team	Status:
	<p>Create a hiring and retention plan, including focused recruitment efforts for individuals representative of the communities served and individuals with lived experience interacting with service systems.</p> <p>Develop an employee assistance program and wellness plan.</p> <p>Determine the team format and identify key staff.</p> <p>Write job descriptions and minimum qualifications to match expected calls.</p> <p>Define salary ranges.</p> <p>Update the organizational chart.</p> <p>Establish a vision for the team's culture and make a plan for integrating new responders within the existing first responder team culture.</p> <p>Determine staffing schedules.</p> <p>Build a staffing plan. This can include the number of staff per unit, units per shift, and shift length.</p>	



Staffing and Capacity Building (continued)

Mid-program development	Develop a team training plan	Status:
	<p>Identify gaps in existing staff training and develop new content, if needed. Common training modules include an overview of the program and department, skill building for service delivery, equipment usage, case management documentation, policies and procedures, and team building.</p> <p>Prioritize training modules.</p> <p>Assign training facilitators.</p> <p>Set the training schedule and expectations.</p> <p>Create a training evaluation plan.</p> <p>Select ongoing training requirements and continued professional development requirements.</p>	
	Create team protocols	Status:
	<p>Develop protocols for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team communications and dispatch (see Dispatch). On-route. On-scene. Safety (the Council of State Governments Justice Center's Community-Driven Crisis Response workbook includes a section on safety protocols and wellness). Referrals and resource distribution. Case management and documentation. Follow-up. Equipment. <p>Establish a process for updating protocols.</p>	
Late development	Compile service referral lists and pathways	Status:
	<p>Create a list of expected resources needed during crisis calls based on call criteria.</p> <p>Build relationships with key local service providers.</p> <p>Identify warm hand-off/referral pathways.</p> <p>Establish a protocol for updating the service referral lists regularly.</p>	



Dispatch

Key stakeholders: 911 call center; EMS, fire, and police departments; vendor (if applicable)

Resources:

- The GPL's [case study on the City of Long Beach's process selecting 911 call types](#)
- The Council of State Governments Justice Center's [Community-Driven Crisis Response](#) workbook — Section on Conducting Emergency and Non-Emergency Call Triage

Mid-program development	Select eligible call types and exclusionary criteria	Status:
	<p>Generate example scenarios of eligible calls for alternative response.</p> <p>Define exclusionary criteria by which to screen calls for risks and safety.</p> <p>Translate scenarios to 911 call types/nature codes used by the 911 call center.</p> <p>Match the exclusionary criteria to the screening questions asked and information gathered by telecommunicators.</p> <p>Conduct data analysis on 911 calls based on the selected call types and exclusionary criteria to review call volumes, dates/times, locations, and dispositions.</p> <p>Engage key partners and lead agencies in the process of developing call criteria.</p>	
	Develop and implement new dispatch protocol	Status:
	<p>Identify necessary changes to dispatch protocol.</p> <p>Create new/updated screening questions aligned with the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria.</p> <p>Integrate the criteria into CAD/ProQA, if applicable.</p> <p>Develop and implement updated dispatch protocol.</p> <p>Design a call triage tree (see an example on page 5 of our report Launching Alternative 911 Emergency Response in the San Gabriel Valley).</p>	
	Deliver new dispatch training	Status:
Late program development	<p>Design a dispatch training plan.</p> <p>Identify training dates/times.</p> <p>Create training materials.</p> <p>Generate staff reference materials (e.g., a fact sheet, frequently asked questions).</p> <p>Establish staff support processes, such as optional office hours, meet and greets with alternative responder teams, or mandatory check-ins with supervisors.</p>	

To learn more about the GPL's Alternative 911 Emergency Response work and research, [visit our website](#). For governments exploring, planning, implementing, or expanding alternative 911 emergency response teams, sign up for the GPL's [Alternative 911 Emergency Response Community of Practice](#). Designed exclusively for government staff, the community of practice provides representatives from over 80 governments across the country with practical tools and actionable insights emerging from the GPL's work. The community of practice convenes monthly, providing a space for participants to engage with government peers on topics like stakeholder collaboration, community outreach, outcomes tracking, and more.

The [Government Performance Lab](#), housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, 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 also able to provide experiential learning.

© Copyright 2024 Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab

Designed by Emily Audet.