



Learning Session: Implementing Alternative 911 Emergency Response Systems

As part of the Government Performance Lab's [10th Anniversary Learning Series](#), this recap summarizes insights from local government leaders on how to translate ambitious visions for alternative 911 emergency systems into concrete, practical action. Featured speakers included Rachael Eisenberg, Office of Criminal Justice Director, City of Philadelphia, PA; Ginger Spencer, Deputy City Manager, City of Phoenix, AZ; and Katie Balderas, Equity Officer, City of Long Beach, CA. The excerpts highlighted below have been edited for clarity and brevity. Listen to the full conversation [here](#).

Long Beach, CA: Developing alternative responses to nonviolent calls for service

In 2020, the City Manager's Office in Long Beach facilitated a community engagement process to identify priorities for addressing systemic racism and policing. During this process, stakeholders identified alternative responses to nonviolent crises as a key need that could serve a dual purpose: providing more holistic, effective support to individuals in crisis while also freeing up law enforcement resources to focus on higher-order, violent crimes. According to Equity Officer, Katie Balderas, by elevating these needs directly from the community, as well as working closely with police, fire, emergency responders, and behavioral health specialists, political support and momentum was created to move to the implementation phase. Long Beach's City Council has allocated \$500,000 of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to launch the alternative response implementation work.

"Part of why [alternative response for nonviolent calls] was able to emerge as a priority is because it's a win-win. The community was asking for these alternate response teams that were trauma-informed and equipped to handle more than just the immediate crisis response, but also to invest in helping someone access services for things like substance use, mental health, homelessness, employment, and all of the things we call 'social determinants of health.' Similarly, we hear from our colleagues in the police and fire departments that they don't have the resources, the specialty, and quite frankly the time to invest in following up to connect these community members to care."

- Katie Balderas, Equity Officer, Long Beach, CA

According to Balderas, analyzing 911 call data as well as mapping existing health and service resources has helped to pinpoint how a new alternative response team could add capacity to the City's emergency response system. Long Beach has a history of effective alternative response models, so this analysis helped to identify a gap in services: a response team separate from police that could respond to mental health calls that showed clear signs of being nonviolent.

"One of the challenges is that many community members want alternative responses for everything - including traffic tickets, domestic disputes, etc. - so we've been working with public safety partners to look at the volume of calls coming in for these issues and hone in on where these alternate response teams could have the greatest impact so we can start there... We're still doing a deep dive analysis but mental health calls for services and calls around services for homelessness have so far risen to the top." - Katie Balderas, Equity Officer, Long Beach, CA

Phoenix, AZ: Expanding crisis response teams to better support individuals who call 911 experiencing a mental health crisis

According to Deputy City Manager, Ginger Spencer, Phoenix is reimagining a longstanding City program to expand resources available for alternative response teams to support individuals in crisis. In 2020, five crisis response teams covered more than 500 square miles in the city, and supported approximately 7,000 individuals. The City budget approved \$15m to expand this program, doubling the number of crisis response teams (from 5 to 10) and creating nine new behavioral health units staffed by clinicians and peer specialists. The expansion will focus on better supporting individuals who call 911 experiencing a mental health crisis. According to Spencer, like in Long Beach, the potential benefits to individuals, emergency systems, and the broader community helped spur momentum to direct resources to the alternative response program expansion.

“One of the things we heard from the community is that ‘we want an alternative response.’ Our Mayor and Council want mental health professionals to respond to these calls. Police officers were saying, if it’s non-criminal and non-violent we want mental health professionals responding to these types of calls. So that’s why we’re here today.”

- Ginger Spencer, Deputy City Manager, Phoenix, AZ

Phoenix is working to tap local resident and stakeholder expertise to inform the design of the crisis and behavioral response teams. For example, Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego held stakeholder meetings with over 40 community agencies as well as City staff from the fire and police departments. To work through and design the program, the City hosts weekly meetings with a multi-disciplinary team that includes fire, police, human services, budget and research, neighborhood services department, and other relevant stakeholders. In addition, Spencer mentioned that the City is planning to hire a community engagement and public outreach specialist to seek community input to shape the program.

“[One piece of advice to other jurisdictions would be] to listen, learn, and engage. Don’t underestimate the importance of involving the community.”

- Ginger Spencer, Deputy City Manager, Phoenix, AZ

Philadelphia, PA: Reforming the 911 system and implementing a co-responder pilot

According to Office of Criminal Justice Director, Rachael Eisenberg, the protests during the summer of 2020 amplified issues around racial justice and the need for alternatives to police response, and served as a catalyst for Philadelphia’s ongoing work. (The City had already planned to introduce a range of reforms, including adding behavioral health supports for 911-call center staff, expanding the City’s crisis line and associated mobile response teams, and launching a co-responder pilot.) To support a quicker move to implementation of these plans, the City committed \$14 million in the 2021 budget to reforming the 911 system and growing the range of first responder options. According to Eisenberg, flexibility and building in mechanisms to course correct have been key to Philadelphia’s approach to implementation.

“As we’re implementing changes across systems - the 911 call center, the crisis call center, and all the associated responder teams - we have to be nimble, and we have to recognize that we may think at the outset that resources are needed in one space and be willing to shift them to another as we move along. And that’s particularly difficult for governments to do, once a budget gets relied upon it’s difficult to change. Staying in a phase of relatively fluidity...that’s been really important for Philadelphia.”

- Rachael Eisenberg, Office of Criminal Justice Director, Philadelphia, PA

Given ongoing work in the 911 call center, the City was able to imbed a behavioral health clinical navigator to help triage calls as well as implement a revised call script to identify behavioral health issues. These changes lay the groundwork for a larger strategy involving full 24/7 staffing inside the call center with behavioral health crisis navigators. Additionally, the City is rolling out a co-responder pilot for calls where there is a behavioral health crisis but also a potential public safety concern. Distinct from the 911 call center, the City has also been expanding the crisis line to enable 24/7 city-wide coverage and the ability to directly receive relevant 911 calls. According to Eisenberg, implementing all these changes, across numerous departments, has required deep partnerships with the police, fire, and behavioral health departments.

“We as the Office of Criminal Justice have served as conveners for this work, but we need our operational partners at every stage. We are trying to infuse joint decision making between the police department, the department of behavioral health, the fire department, recognizing that as you’re fusing multiple systems together that everyone’s operational constraints are different. The needs that they may have in terms of information sharing, budget restrictions, personnel, all of that really requires joint decision making.”

- Rachael Eisenberg, Office of Criminal Justice Director, Philadelphia, PA

Eisenberg also credits community partnerships as being key to clearing the way for quick and careful implementation of alternative responses. A community advisory committee has been actively participating in the implementation process, and the City has been hosting open meetings to workshop aspects of the program with the community (for example, soliciting feedback on 911 call taker scripts, team uniforms, types of vehicles, etc.).

For more information on this work, visit the GPL’s [Alternative 911 Response Emergency Response](#) website page and consider joining our [Alternative 911 Emergency Response Community of Practice](#).

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