



Innovations in 911 Response

Hiring and Supporting Alternative Responders

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Since launching services in 2022, [Durham's Community Safety Department \(DCSD\)](#) has become a model for 911 crisis response programs across the country. Durham's response teams — collectively known as Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Teams (HEART) — send trained, unarmed mental health professionals to respond to community members experiencing mental health crises or quality of life concerns. DCSD's Stabilization Services Division houses several programs that work to connect neighbors with longer-term resources.

DCSD is staffed by professionals with varied expertise and backgrounds, including social workers, EMTs, data analysts, and peer-support specialists. Over the past four years, DCSD has grown to a workforce of 83 employees and has seen low turnover across their staff. DCSD's approach to hiring, training, and building a strong team culture can serve as a model to similar programs across the country.

The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) has provided technical assistance and research support to DCSD over the past four years.¹ **We asked leaders in Durham to walk us through their approach to the following key staffing questions:**

1. **Hiring:** In an emerging field, how do you recruit and select the right people to staff your programs?
2. **Training:** How do you prepare your alternative response workforce to effectively handle the wide range of calls they may encounter?
3. **Retention and Culture:** In a role that regularly exposes staff to stress and trauma, how do you create a supportive culture that fosters well-being and retention?
4. **Collaboration:** How do you build cohesive, multidisciplinary teams that work well together in high-stress scenarios?

This publication is the fourth in the GPL's *Innovations in 911 Response* series, which spotlights Durham's approach to creating and operating an alternative response program.

[Click here](#) to read the other publications about starting a program, using data, and 911 integration.

1. DCSD requested that the GPL document their implementation learnings and share those insights with other jurisdictions interested in starting or expanding their own alternative response programs.

1. **Hiring:** In an emerging field, how do you recruit and select the right people to staff your programs?

Nationally, the demand for qualified behavioral health professionals is outpacing supply as communities face increasing rates of substance use and mental health needs. A [Health Resources and Services Administration \(HRSA\) study](#) underscores this workforce gap, finding that 122 million people nationwide live in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area. This shortage often leads to unmanageably large caseloads and staff burnout, which is further compounded by complex and often costly licensing requirements, creating barriers to entry for many prospective professionals.

Beyond broader workforce shortages, alternative response programs face unique challenges in recruiting and hiring staff. Alternative emergency response is an emerging field without established educational or credentialing pipelines, making it difficult to recruit candidates with the specific skill set this work requires. Additionally, pay and benefits for alternative response staff are often less competitive than other first responders, creating additional recruitment barriers.

Durham's Approach: Selecting the Best Candidates Using Competency-Based Hiring

Government hiring processes are often lengthy and bureaucratic, involving multiple layers of approval and detailed documentation. These requirements are designed to ensure fairness and transparency, yet they can significantly slow down the recruitment timeline and hinder agencies' ability to quickly onboard qualified candidates. In addition, many government hiring processes place greater emphasis on evaluating candidates' on-paper credentials such as degrees and certificates, rather than their core skills or competencies. Recognizing that this model of hiring might not yield the best-fit candidates, DCSD leadership has developed a competency-based recruitment and interviewing processes to efficiently identify and hire candidates who have the skill set needed to respond to neighbors in crisis.



“If I’m hiring someone, their interview process depends on the skills they need to succeed in that role. If I’m going to hire a data analyst, I will send them a spreadsheet as part of the interview and have them clean it or I will send them a clean one and ask them to run analytics. With responders, we need them to be able to deescalate, provide caring support, and build connections with neighbors. If that’s what I’m after, then in the interview process I need to assess for those things through role-plays and scenario-based work so that I can see how they would act in those settings and if they are the right fit for our department.”

— Anise Vance, DCSD Assistant Director

Since its launch, DCSD has grown from 13 full-time employees in fiscal year 2021–2022 to 83 people (75 positions from city-funded roles and 8 additional positions funded through grants or part-time interns) in the fiscal year 2024–2025 budget. Over time, the department has refined its approach to hiring to include structured assessments and field experience, which has helped them improve both the caliber of new hires and their likelihood of staying with the department long term.²

Based on Durham’s experience improving its hiring process, the following strategies can help alternative response programs implement a competency-based hiring system to attract and select the best-fit candidates.

- **Conduct active, targeted recruitment to build a pipeline of strong applicants.** In many jurisdictions, staff lack the capacity to actively promote new job openings and instead rely solely on city job sites to advertise available positions. However, effective hiring starts with recruitment by attracting the right candidates to apply for your positions. DCSD proactively recruited candidates by posting opportunities on job boards for professional networking organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers, community partner listservs, and directly reaching out to potential candidates. Durham also leveraged internship placements from social work programs and built relationships with partner agencies to cultivate a pipeline of candidates.
 - This type of active outreach is especially important when alternative response programs are new, and the public may be unfamiliar with the department’s role and services. Recruiting from multiple places also helped Durham build a team with diverse backgrounds and life experiences, which fosters innovation and allows teams to more effectively support the varied needs of neighbors.

2. These strategies largely apply to first responders hired to staff HEART. DCSD adjusts this approach for office-based roles.

Members of HEART pose for a photo.



- **Identify the skills that matter most for alternative responders and design job descriptions that bring those competencies to the forefront.** Rather than recycling pre-existing job descriptions or using generic language to describe roles, DCSD developed comprehensive descriptions that provide a clear picture of daily responsibilities while also communicating the organization's mission and culture. When drafting these descriptions, DCSD prioritized identifying the key competencies required for success, rather than emphasizing formal qualifications that could pose barriers to hiring the most suitable candidates.
 - **Tip:** In Durham, leaders found it helpful to create one central application when initially recruiting for several alternative response programs at once. This allowed them to match people's skills with the appropriate teams, rather than requiring that candidates self-select for new programs that they may not fully understand.



“Everything we’ve done in hiring has been iterative. The first time you hire as a new program is the hardest because you have nothing to show candidates about the work. It gets easier once you have been doing the work because you can show candidates what their role might look like.”

— Ryan Smith, Director of DCSD

- **Assess candidates’ skills through scenario-based and role-play interview questions that mirror the day-to-day experience of a responder.** Instead of using standard government interview processes that focus more on verifying formal qualifications, such as degrees, DCSD identified a set of core competencies and skills they were looking for, and then designed interviews that actively evaluate a candidate's skill level. Their interview protocols include scenario-based and role-play questions that ask applicants to demonstrate how they would respond to common situations they may face as a responder. These protocols let DCSD assess how applicants respond under pressure, de-escalate conflict, communicate, solve problems, and make decisions in real-time; all core skills needed to succeed as a crisis responder.
 - A Community Response Team (CRT)³ interview may include the following or a similar scenario-based interview question: “Your team is called to respond to a 911 call. The notes from the 911 call-taker share that there is a man throwing rocks at cars and hallucinating along a busy road. Walk us through how you would approach this call.”

3. In Durham, CRT dispatches unarmed three-person teams as first responders to non-violent behavioral health and quality of life calls for service.



A HEART crisis responder on the way to a call.

- **Conduct ride-alongs to assess candidates' in-field skills and to help them determine if the role is a good fit.** Many programs do not offer ride-alongs as part of the interview process, but rather during the training stage. DCSD decided instead to take applicants on a typical call, rather than just talk about it. This experience serves dual purposes: 1) it gives front-line staff an opportunity to evaluate a candidate's fit for the role, and 2) it gives candidates an opportunity to decide if the position is right for them. Incorporating ride-alongs is another way DCSD uses competency-based hiring techniques to ensure candidates have the necessary skills to do this work.
- **Tip:** To ensure candidates are actively engaged during ride-alongs, DCSD developed a Ride-Along Engagement Activity, which includes prompts for a candidate to respond to in real-time. Prompts include: "Describe at least one unmet need that you observed," or "What would be your areas of strength or improvement for the calls you observed? Why?"

"The goal of a ride-along isn't just for us to assess if someone is a good fit for the role, it is also for them to decide if this role is right for them. With Crisis Response Team calls, for example, you could be in any situation, anywhere, at any time. It's important for candidates to see if they're comfortable with this unpredictability and if it's something they really want to do."

— Delilah Kelly, DCSD Training and Hiring Specialist





“Every call is complex — influenced by the crisis itself, historical patterns of 911 response, social and political factors, and systemic barriers that shape available support. You can’t capture all of that through traditional interview questions, which is why scenario-based and role-play questions are so valuable. They let us see how candidates think through these dynamics, how they approach a call, and how they balance creativity and compassion to meet a neighbor’s needs.”

— Kirby Jones, DCSD Crisis Response Shift Supervisor

Hiring the Right Candidates: Ask Yourself

- Have we identified and recruited from the places where high-quality candidates might come from, including professional networks and social work programs?
- Are the skills we’ve prioritized in our job descriptions the ones that are necessary to do this work?
- Are we including any unnecessary requirements that create barriers to hiring high-quality candidates?
- Do our interview protocols allow us to assess if a candidate has the skills needed to do this work?
- Do candidates leave the hiring process with a clear sense of what it’s like to work in this role?

Additional Resources:

- For example job descriptions and application questionnaires for roles HEART has previously hired for, visit [this folder](#).
- Click here to read DCSD’s [Ride Along Engagement Activity](#).
- To read through an interview agenda and several scenario-based interview questions, [click here](#).

2. **Training:** How did you train your alternative response workforce to effectively respond to calls?

Staff training is a critical component of building an impactful alternative response program. An effective training program should seek to both deepen the skills and capabilities of responders and to build camaraderie among new and existing team members. Since most alternative response programs are relatively new, there is no established field-wide training infrastructure or standard curriculum. As a result, DCSD built a robust training curriculum and continues to update it based on their learnings. Additionally, many new hires — including social workers, clinicians, and peer navigators — are entering the field of 911 response for the first time. This means that any training must also help staff learn to adapt their prior professional expertise to the unique demands of high-stress, crisis-driven environments.

Durham's Approach: Designing the HEART Academy to Build Skills and Community

Recognizing the importance of a comprehensive training program, DCSD designed a six-week curriculum for all new staff called the HEART Academy. By hiring in cohorts, DCSD enables staff to train side-by-side and strengthen peer connections. This program helps ensure that staff are well equipped to enter the field and respond to residents in crisis.



“We owe it to the neighbors that we’re serving to invest in robust training for our staff. The issues that we’re responding to are often complex and there’s often no immediate or clear answer, so we need to invest in training that best positions staff to problem solve difficult calls.”

— Ryan Smith, DCSD Director

“I would add that we owe it to our staff to invest in training, too. We have a lot of different systems that we ask our staff to learn to make sure that they are safe, that we can make data-driven decisions, and that we can connect neighbors to the right care. It takes time to learn how to use those systems effectively, and we believe that investing in training at the outset pays off.”

— Anise Vance, DCSD Assistant Director



HEART Academy At-A-Glance

An effective training program should cover a wide array of topics related to alternative response and behavioral health. Topics covered through activities during the six weeks of the HEART Academy include:

Topic	Activities
Team & Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ice-breakers and team-building activities• Eating meals together
Organizational Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presentations on the history of the department, organizational structure and roles• Discussions about related justice system topics such as domestic violence, substance use disorder• Opportunities to learn about, and engage with, local service providers and community organizations
On-Scene Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explanations of team procedures and schedules• Tours of vehicles and supply rooms• Role plays• Ride-alongs and in-the-field trainings• Trainings on conflict resolution• Workshops on generating service referrals
Operations & Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trainings on devices: e.g., radios, cell phones and tablets• Trainings on software: e.g., clinical software, 911 software• Trainings on internal processes: e.g., time sheets, time off and holiday procedures, work badges

The following strategies from DCSD's approach to designing the HEART Academy can serve as a guide for programs as they create their own training curriculum.

- **Train alternative responders in cohorts to ensure consistency and foster camaraderie.** Instead of hiring and training individual team members, DCSD has prioritized hiring and training responders in cohorts. This can help ensure that new hires receive robust and consistent training, while also saving operational resources. Hiring and then training staff in cohorts can also foster strong interpersonal bonds among new hires.

“It’s easier to coordinate everything involved in a six-week program when we bring people in as a group. Training people in cohorts also helps us establish a sense of belonging and purpose in this department. Thinking back to my own HEART Academy, training as a group was valuable preparation for our work, which is largely team-based. It gave us a chance to practice the skills like conflict management and communication that are necessary to do this type of work.”

— Kirby Jones, DCSD Crisis Response Shift Supervisor



- **Include early opportunities for structured role-playing and ride-alongs to prepare staff for in-field responses.** DCSD stands out for its strong emphasis on role-playing scenarios and ride-alongs as key methods for staff training. This helps new staff practice on-scene interactions, ask role-specific questions, and receive feedback in a low-stakes environment. Role playing can be facilitated by current staff and, when possible, enhanced using volunteer actors or community partners to create more realistic scenarios. New hires are also given multiple opportunities to shadow and ride along with teams across DCSD. This gives them in-field experience and shows them how all the different teams collaborate. Unlike traditional job training settings, DCSD uses hands-on learning to have people practice the tools and skills they will need to learn on the job.

New HEART hires role-play an interaction with a neighbor.





“Adults learn differently from children, we need more interaction and opportunities for independent reflection. It’s important to have that time to connect what we already know with what we’re learning. I think what makes the HEART Academy so unique is that it’s engaging. We’re not just talking at new hires and having them take notes. Instead, we use ride-alongs and role-playing to prepare people for the field. In this role, you’re going to have a lot of things that you have never been exposed to before and there will be things that catch you off-guard. Giving people the opportunity to practice what they’ve learned about crisis response in a low-stakes environment is incredibly important.”

— Delilah Kelly, DCSD Training and Hiring Specialist

- **Conduct post-training assessments to determine field readiness.** Often, programs struggle to evaluate whether their responders are ready to enter the field, usually using training completion as a proxy for readiness. Durham uses role-specific checklists and in-field training rubrics to assess field readiness for their crisis responders before they enter the field full-time. These checklists include technical tasks, such as using a dispatch radio, as well as core responder competencies, including how to approach a scene. These tools help DCSD evaluate if a new hire is ready to safely and effectively respond to calls, and highlights what skills they may need continued support to develop after they formally complete training.
- **Design training agendas and learning environments that reflect the culture you want to build.** New hire training often takes place in traditional, sterile classroom settings. This may hinder responders’ ability to build relationships across their training cohort. Durham has incorporated several approaches to make new staff feel welcome and to signal that staff well-being is a priority for the department, including:
 - Incorporating frequent affirmations on materials (e.g., the back of each DCSD trainee name card has an affirmation of: “This team is better because you’re here”).
 - Opening and closing sessions with simple icebreakers (e.g., “write on a sticky note one reason you are excited to be here today”).
 - Including sessions on mindfulness and self-reflection throughout the curriculum.

Discussing Challenging Topics: HEART's Foundational Mornings

HEART's Academy incorporates "Foundational Mornings" sessions three times each week that aim to: 1) provide all new hires with shared knowledge of foundational topics related to the field of alternative response and 2) develop closer relationships between new hires through personal reflection and sharing opportunities. Previous Foundational Mornings have explored a variety of topics, including Mass Incarceration and Survivorship.

These sessions use a **classroom-style learning approach** to share information about core topics. Trainees review multimedia resources (e.g., videos, articles, etc.), reflect on a set of discussion questions, and then discuss their reflections as a group. New staff are asked to react to the content shared in these sessions and are encouraged to share their reflections with the group.

Importantly, there is no expectation that new hires agree with everything shared, but they are expected to understand the foundational context about the movements that resulted in the creation of the department and the broader field of alternative response.

HEART Leadership prioritizes attending these sessions and models expected behavior by **exhibiting vulnerability and openness to discussing hard topics**.

HEART responders prepare to go out on a call.



“One of the things that I’ve really appreciated about the HEART Academy curriculum is that we embed a lot of philosophy and reflection around the work that we do and why we do it. We invite current responders to talk about why they are doing this work and their personal stories and journeys to this department. Hearing from staff who have a solid sense of their purpose and allowing them to share their story in a structured way allows people to build connections to each other and this work.”

— Kirby Jones, DCSD Crisis Response Shift Supervisor

- **When possible, partner with external organizations to deliver trainings and share information about the resources they offer.** DCSD has partnered with nonprofits, service providers, and government staff to lead portions of their training curriculum. This approach broadens the expertise available to trainees and reduces the burden on internal staff.
 - Examples include hosting resource roundtables, bringing in external providers to offer skills-based workshops such as conflict resolution, or collaborating with legal experts to cover relevant policies and procedures. This approach sends the message that collaboration with other agencies is expected and introduces new responders to the Durham provider landscape. However, organizing trainings from external partners can be labor-intensive and potentially costly, so departments should consider the trade-offs of this approach.
- **Regularly seek feedback on training.** DCSD fields regular surveys throughout the HEART Academy to capture new hires' feedback on trainings to inform improvements for future Academies. While training is an essential part of ensuring that responders are ready to enter the field, it is also highly resource intensive. If leaders can get a clear understanding of what is and isn't working, they can streamline training to ensure that limited resources are used efficiently.

Training Staff to Effectively Respond to Calls: Ask Yourself

- What are the essential skills staff need to build during training to safely and effectively respond to calls?
- What are ways that we can have staff practice applying skills during training?
- Are there external organizations in our community that are well-positioned to lead any of these trainings?
- Do our assessment processes allow us to evaluate if new hires are ready to enter the field?
- Are we gathering regular feedback from staff to improve future training cycles?

Additional Resources

- For a sample HEART Academy schedule, [click here](#).
- For an example in-field training rubric used by DCSD, [click here](#).
- The Crisis Call Diversion (CCD) Competency Checklist is used to ensure their clinicians are adequately trained to answer 911 calls. [Read it here](#).
- For an example survey assessing responder experience in a training, [click here](#).

3. **Retention and Culture:** In a role that regularly exposes staff to stress and trauma, how do you create a supportive culture that fosters well-being and retention?

Alternative emergency responders operate in uniquely high-pressure environments. Multiple times a day, they are called to support community members experiencing crises ranging from overdoses to suicidal ideation to housing instability. In these moments, responders must make quick, high-stakes decisions — work that can generate significant stress and vicarious trauma. Over time, these demands can contribute to burnout and staff turnover.

Durham's Approach: Building a Culture that Supports Staff

Departments can support staff by building a strong and caring workplace culture and investing significantly in responder well-being. In Durham, leaders invested early in creating a culture that encourages staff to voice their opinions, prioritizes their well-being, and views this work as a team effort.

“DCSD is a space where people can speak up and ask questions. Leadership encourages open-mindedness and values different perspectives and experiences—both professional and personal—which allows people to meaningfully contribute to the department. That inclusivity helps retention. Every workplace has pros and cons, but here, people know their voices are heard, their input matters, and they have opportunities to grow.”

— Delilah Kelly, DCSD Training and Hiring Specialist



While all staff contribute to a team's culture, creating a culture that is open to new ideas and collaboration starts with the leadership team. Leaders of alternative response programs looking to build or strengthen their team culture should consider the following lessons from Durham's approach:

- **Establish a clear, long-term vision for your department to build staff buy-in.** Consistently articulating a shared goal can help staff understand what they are working toward. DCSD leaders consistently point to their “north star” vision of building a department that functions as a fourth branch of emergency response, fully staffed to respond to all eligible calls.
- **Lead by example to establish the culture and norms you want to create.** Leaders play a central role in shaping organizational culture by modeling vulnerability, emotional expression, and authenticity. By consistently attending onboarding activities, group reflections, and meditations, DCSD leaders signal that personal growth and building connections are integral to the work. Although departmental leaders are often pulled in multiple directions, taking the time to connect with staff can help them feel more welcome and increase retention.

- **Create channels for staff to provide feedback and build relationships with leadership.** Leadership at DCSD places a heavy emphasis on creating opportunities for staff to share their ideas or concerns without fear of punishment. Fostering this kind of work environment is often referred to as creating psychological safety. When DCSD first began operations with their small team, responders had direct access to departmental leaders. As the department has grown, they have adopted new approaches that still allow access, but in a more structured manner. DCSD leaders now hold weekly office hours to create a space for staff to drop by with questions or ideas. The department also leverages their Learning and Iteration Lab — an internal team that supports data collection and continuous improvement across DCSD — to frequently solicit feedback from staff and elevate these findings to leadership when needed. These practices can help staff feel comfortable raising issues, feel confident their perspectives are valued, and see that leadership is invested in open communication.



“It’s important that staff feel comfortable speaking to leadership, but we also have to think about how to make that access feel equitable. There are some people who have been here for longer and have strong relationships with Ryan and Anise or who possess more privileged identities that would make them feel more comfortable interacting with leadership, so it’s important that we build structure around these interactions.”

— Kirby Jones, DCSD Crisis Response Shift Supervisor

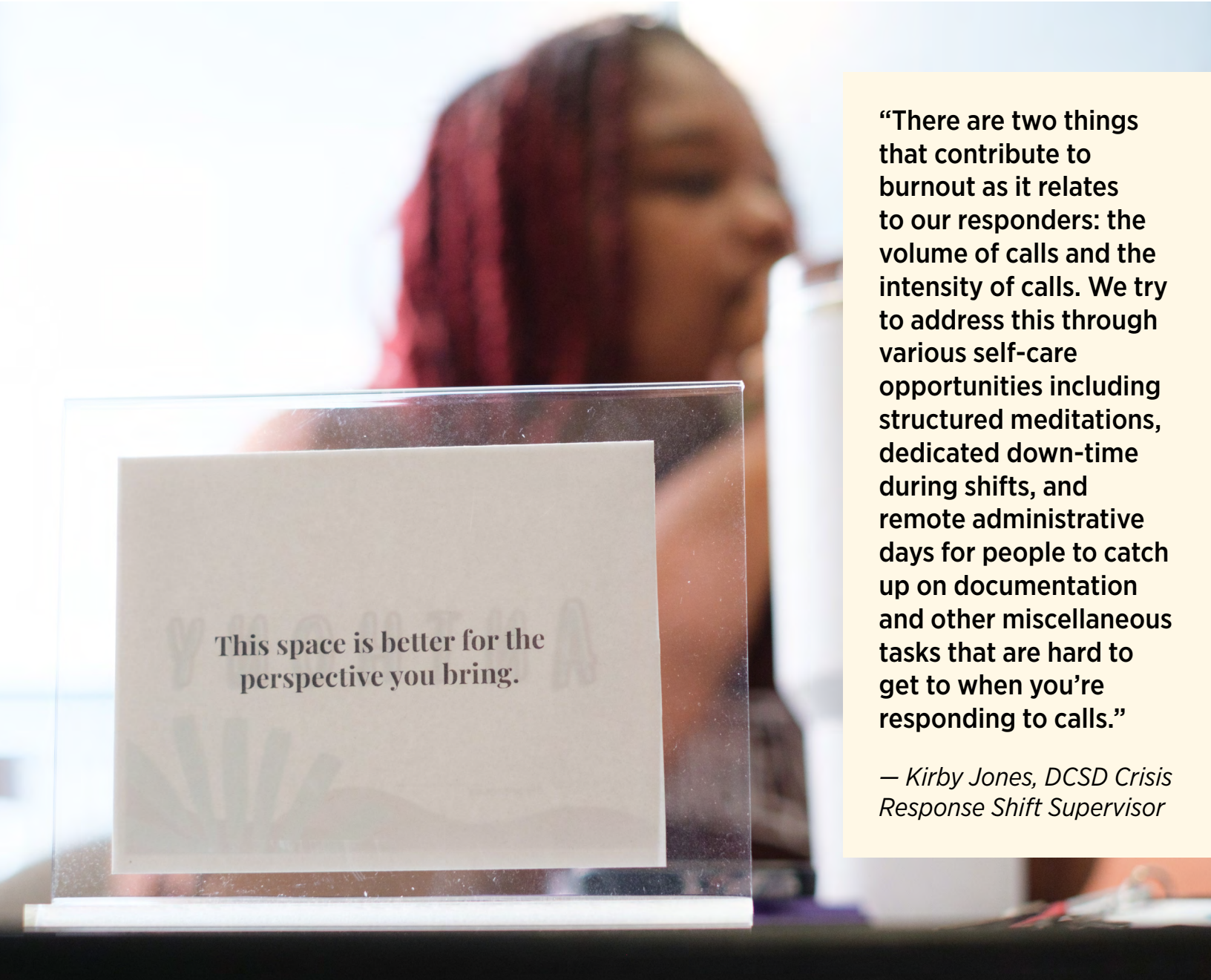
- **Create opportunities for staff to take care of themselves and others to reduce burnout.** DCSD values their responders’ well-being and happiness. When leaders provide responders with a suite of activities and set aside time for these activities, it can signal to staff that prioritizing their mental health is valued by the department. Such well-being practices can reduce stress and better equip staff to meet the high-pressure demands of alternative response work.

Examples of how DCSD incorporates self-care and well-being into their operations:

- **Regular staff meditation sessions:** Regular meditation — offered three mornings a week — gives responders dedicated space to pause and reset. Participation is encouraged but flexible, reinforcing staff autonomy and recognizing that self-regulation looks different for everyone.
- **Capacity charts:** A chart during HEART Academy allows responders to place a spoon labeled with their name along a scale of one to five, representing how much physical and mental energy they have available that day. This practice creates a quick, nonverbal way to check in on team well-being, normalize fluctuations in capacity, and encourage mutual support.

- **Thoughtfully designed office spaces:** Designing a physical space where responders can feel relaxed and that facilitates teamwork is another way departments can reduce burnout. Open, light-filled spaces create natural opportunities for collaboration and connection, while a dedicated decompression room can provide a quieter setting for rest and recovery. DCSD's office is outfitted with comfortable seating, games, and sensory tools, signaling to responders that taking time to reset is not only acceptable, but encouraged.
- **Creating levity when appropriate:** Responding to neighbors experiencing behavioral health or quality of life crises is emotionally taxing and heavy work. By finding opportunities to create moments of joy and humor, leaders can help their teams build connections and sustain their energy. One example is DCSD's [Official Bird Protocol](#). Upon graduating from the HEART Academy, staff members are given a "bird name," by their teammates that reflects a facet of their personality or approach to this work. All staff members, including the director, have a bird name that people often use as shorthand when referencing their colleagues.

A positive affirmation sits on display during new hire training.

A woman with red hair is seen in profile, looking at a framed affirmation card. The card is white with black text and is mounted on a clear acrylic stand. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an office or training environment.

This space is better for the
perspective you bring.

"There are two things that contribute to burnout as it relates to our responders: the volume of calls and the intensity of calls. We try to address this through various self-care opportunities including structured meditations, dedicated down-time during shifts, and remote administrative days for people to catch up on documentation and other miscellaneous tasks that are hard to get to when you're responding to calls."

— Kirby Jones, DCSD Crisis Response Shift Supervisor

Shaping Culture Through Leadership

The following is part of an interview with Ryan Smith and Anise Vance as they talk through their thought processes behind the structure of DCSD's leadership and culture.

Q: Why was it important to you that HEART has a strong organizational culture? How do you as leaders model these norms for your staff?

Anise Vance: Our society and systems are currently constructed in ways that are punitive, unfair, and that reproduce inequality and trauma. Those systems are a reflection of cultural norms and values. So, if you are fundamentally concerned with producing different outcomes, as many of us at DCSD are, you have to create new systems and norms.

Ryan Smith: That transformative work requires your leaders to be active participants in manifesting those values, in speaking to those values, in living into those values as best they can. Signaling to our staff that these are things we care about, we are deeply invested in, that we are holding ourselves to — even when we don't meet the mark — makes it so that our staff feel like they can deeply invest in this department too.



Q: Why is it important for staff to have direct access to leadership?



Ryan Smith: If we as leaders deprive ourselves of open access to our staff, there will be critical things about our programs that we do not see, critical things that our staff who have different perspectives and lived expertise can share that will help us deliver on our mission. The complex nature of our work requires that we have many eyes and minds thinking about how we can best support neighbors, and that's why we need to think meaningfully about collaboration as a department.

Anise Vance: Core to our values is the idea that power — defined as the ability to change a situation—should be more diffuse. This is not to say that decision making shouldn't be structured or that there aren't very particular decision-making flows, but that our staff should have the ability to impact those decisions. When staff are isolated from the people who are making the highest-level decisions, that means that they have a reduced ability to influence those decisions. It is important to us that staff are a part of decision-making conversations — not that they're making the decisions necessarily, but that they are included in the process. For example, we spent a lot of time collecting input from staff on how we should organize our shift schedules for responder teams.

Q: Why do you value incorporating diverse perspectives into your department's decision-making?

Ryan Smith: Anise and I have learned many lessons about leadership through this work. We know that you need a hierarchical structure and clear roles and responsibilities, but you can still include staff in decision-making. You need to engage meaningfully with your staff so that the sum total of their expertise and perspectives shape and inform your work. We're all better off because of that.

Anise Vance: A high level of access creates an atmosphere in which staff feel more purpose in the work because they have a sense that the whole place is authentic in its desire to see this work moving forward. Something that Ryan says quite often is that he can't possibly know enough about DCSD if he isn't talking to everybody in our organization. For us, it's about us being able to really, truly understand the problems we face, the problems that our staff face, and make decisions in light of that information.

Ryan Smith: I also think that for me as a white man leading a department, I need to lead in a collaborative manner because it's the best insurance that things I may not be aware of or may not have the kind of deep lived experience to understand are addressed. You have to find ways where you're creating spaces for conversations that encourage collaborative work because it makes the department better as a whole.



Ryan Smith and Anise Vance have a conversation in the HEART office.

Building Culture and Retaining Staff: Ask Yourself

- Are we consistently articulating a clear long-term vision for staff?
- Are we creating a culture where staff feel comfortable approaching leadership with questions, concerns, or suggestions?
- Are we offering opportunities for staff to practice self-care? Can we build these into our regular routines?
- Does our physical space foster collaboration, decompression, and team connection?

Additional Resources:

- New staff are sent a welcome packet that highlights DCSD's cultural norms. This packet can be [accessed here](#).
- HEART fields a quarterly pulse survey to measure staff satisfaction and identify areas for change. See an [example survey](#) here.

4. **Collaboration:** How do you build cohesive, multidisciplinary teams that work well together in high-stress scenarios?

Alternative emergency response programs often rely on multi-disciplinary teams, drawing on the expertise of professionals from different backgrounds. A single response team may include a behavioral health professional, an emergency medical technician (EMT), and a peer navigator (someone with lived expertise navigating the criminal legal or behavioral health systems). This diversity of background and perspective is a strength, but it can also present challenges; programs must ensure that responders can collaborate effectively, build trust quickly, and present a united front in moments of crisis. Without intentional structures for teamwork, responders risk operating in silos rather than as cohesive units.

Durham's Approach: Fostering Collaborative Response Teams

As DCSD has grown over the years, they have experimented with several approaches and iterations to organizing and coordinating teams. Leaders can consider the following lessons from DCSD's approach to building collaborative teams and addressing conflict:

- **Establish a lead when responding to calls but allow teams to coordinate other day-to-day responsibilities among themselves.** When responding to calls in the field, it's important to have an established team leader. For example, on Durham's Community Response Team calls, the clinician is always the lead, meaning they direct the on-scene response. This helps

Staff from Durham's Police Department, HEART, and Fire Department pose for a photo.



eliminate ambiguity on calls and supports team safety. However, when possible, DCSD allows staff to delegate day-to-day responsibilities such as who is driving the van, reviewing call notes, or preparing supplies among themselves. This balance of clear leadership with shared responsibility helps ensure that all team members are engaged and that the team can adapt smoothly to the needs of each shift.

- **Create team charters to establish norms.** A team charter is a shared document that each responder team creates that outlines their roles and responsibilities, team values, and communication norms. DCSD's team charters cover an array of topics including preferred communication styles, personal triggers, and creating shared values. Drafting a charter creates space for DCSD teams to set expectations proactively, fostering ownership, cohesion, and stronger collaboration in the field.
- **Debrief challenging calls with supervisors:** After particularly challenging calls, supervisors should lead response teams through structured debrief conversations. These sessions can give members the opportunity to revisit how decisions were made, reflect on what unfolded, and share their perspectives. By providing space to reflect and process experiences openly, debriefs help team members learn from challenges and reduce the risk of future conflict.



“As a shift supervisor, part of my role is making sure responders are going to the calls they’re assigned to, but it’s also about being there for them after tough calls. For example, a team may respond to a call that involves a death. Those scenes are complex, exhausting, and emotionally heavy. In moments like this, it’s important to create a space for teams to debrief. We have a debrief outline, guide, and protocol that we use when someone has a difficult call, but a lot of it is also about taking that intentional, sometimes unplanned, time to check in and help them process what happened, assess what they might need, and figure out how to best support them for the rest of the shift.”

— Kirby Jones, DCSD Crisis Response Shift Supervisor



HEART staff working together in the office.

Fostering Collaborative Teams: Ask Yourself

- Do team members know who is leading each call, and are individual roles clearly defined?
- Have teams developed shared practices that reflect their communication styles and shared values?
- When challenging calls arise, is there a defined way to address them that leaves staff feeling heard and supported?

Additional Resources:

- To establish norms and discuss team preferences, DCSD asks each response team to fill out a team charter and regularly revisit it. To access DCSD's charter template, [click here](#).

To learn more about alternative response:

- Explore the other publications in the [Innovations in 911 Response series](#).
- Join the GPL's [Alternative Response Community of Practice](#) to connect with other jurisdictions working to advance alternative response.
- Browse the GPL's [other tools and research](#) on alternative emergency response.



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.

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