



Innovations in 911 Response

Establishing an Alternative Response Program in Your City

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Durham's Community Safety Department (DCSD) operates one of the [largest alternative response programs in the country](#),¹ sending specially trained, unarmed professionals on a wide variety of 911 calls involving mental and behavioral health and quality of life concerns. Since 2021, DCSD's teams have responded to more than 28,000 calls to 911 with a consistently low rate of requests for backup from other public safety departments and no major injuries to their responders.

DCSD's 911 responses are collectively known as the Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Teams (HEART). The department also manages a host of teams that connect residents to resources and long-term support with a goal of supporting sustained stabilization.²

The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) has supported Durham, North Carolina, and its alternative response programming since DCSD's inception. **We asked leaders in Durham to share how they started their program so other leaders could see if a similar approach might work for their communities.**

1. [Response Model](#): How did you choose the response team models that could be most impactful in your community?
2. [Program Home](#): How did you decide where to house your program?
3. [Staffing Model](#): How did you decide whether to staff your team with city employees or work with a contracted provider?
4. [Team Structure](#): How did you approach hiring and developing an organizational structure?
5. [Funding Sources](#): How do you fund your program long term?

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

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

[Click here](#) to download a worksheet: ***Playbook: Developing an Alternative Response Program*** to fill out while you read. 

1. See [Program by Annual Call Volume](#).

2. 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.

A Push for Change

In 2020, several high-profile police killings sparked outrage around the country, including in Durham, North Carolina. We spoke to leaders about the city's history of advocacy around policing and justice systems. This history prepared them to act when concerned residents advocated for a change in how the city responded to 911 calls.

Government leaders answered those concerns by partnering with local researchers to study 911 call data. They also convened a task force to recommend programs to enhance public safety and wellness. The task force focused on exploring programs that use community-based prevention, intervention, and reentry services as alternatives to policing and criminal legal system involvement.



“It’s no secret that there’s great concern about violent crime in Durham. At the same time, there’s concern about the history of policing in our country and its impact on people of color. Right now, Durham has the opportunity to lead the way and find new equitable and innovative approaches to keep our community safe and well.”

— Wanda Page, Durham City Manager, 2021-2024

1. Response Model: How did you choose the response team models that could be most impactful in your community?

Alternative response encompasses a wide array of responses and services. It can include things like embedded mental health clinicians in 911 centers to support crisis over the phone, in-person responses by unarmed professionals — like clinicians, peer support specialists, social workers, or medics — and follow-up care or case management for individuals served during the emergency encounter.

In Durham, officials determined that meeting the city’s needs would require three types of responses, along with additional teams for follow-up and care navigation. The responses included an embedded mental health clinician in the 911 center to support dispatch and address issues over the phone, a team of unarmed, non-law enforcement professionals to respond to nonviolent, weaponless 911 calls, and a mental health clinician who would respond to calls with a higher safety risk alongside a crisis intervention team (CIT)-trained officer.

When determining which response team models are right for them, jurisdiction leaders can consider four key actions to arrive at that decision: **1) Listen to the community, 2) Assemble a team of thought leaders, 3) Conduct background research, and 4) Analyze data.**

Durham’s Approach: Over six months, Durham hosted town halls, focus groups, and interviews to engage residents, first responders, and community groups. Hearing from residents who previously experienced a crisis and interacted with first responders helped leaders identify what skills alternative responders should have, as well as what sort of uniforms and vehicles residents would best respond to. Community and public safety partners shared ideas about gaps in services as well as potential performance metrics.

To read more about Durham’s approach to community engagement events and learnings, find DCSD’s Year One Engagement Summary [here](#).

Listening to the Community: Ask Yourself

- Who should we talk to?
- How can we engage with them?
- What do we hope to learn from listening?
- How will we use the input and share back what we’ve learned?



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2. Assemble a team of thought leaders

Durham's Approach: Durham created a task force that included the local public safety network (Durham's police, fire, and 911 departments), health care providers, community-based organizations, and academic thought partners to advise on the design of Durham's alternative response program. Crucial to this group's success was its designation as an advisory committee rather than one that required consensus to move forward. Durham leaders told us they learned from observing other jurisdictions that when multi-agency groups are required to come to consensus, it draws the boundaries of a program too small.

Assembling a Team: Ask Yourself

- What do we hope this advisory group will contribute?
- What types of expertise or experience does the group need?
- How much weight will their advice carry?



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3. Conduct background research on response models

Durham's Approach: Durham spoke to leaders from existing alternative response programs including Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) from Eugene, Oregon; Supported Team Assisted Response (STAR) from Denver, Colorado; and the Albuquerque Community Safety (ACS) department in New Mexico. DCSD also gathered data from these programs to understand what calls they were sending to alternative responders and how often those calls were escalating to police due to safety concerns. Learning from peer jurisdictions helped Durham understand how program components like models (e.g., solo response or co-response), team makeup, staffing, and operations could be tailored for maximum impact depending on jurisdictional needs.

Conducting Background Research: Ask Yourself

- Are there programs that decision-makers in our jurisdiction already support or consider peers?
- What do we want to learn from peer jurisdictions that would help us design our program?
- Which questions can we answer with available materials and which answers require talking to peers?



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4. Analyze your data

Durham's Approach: Durham partnered with a local research organization, RTI International, to analyze Durham's 911 call data, conduct a use-of-force analysis, and host focus groups with local police to help understand the types of 911 calls that could benefit from an alternative response and what types of skills would be needed to address those calls.

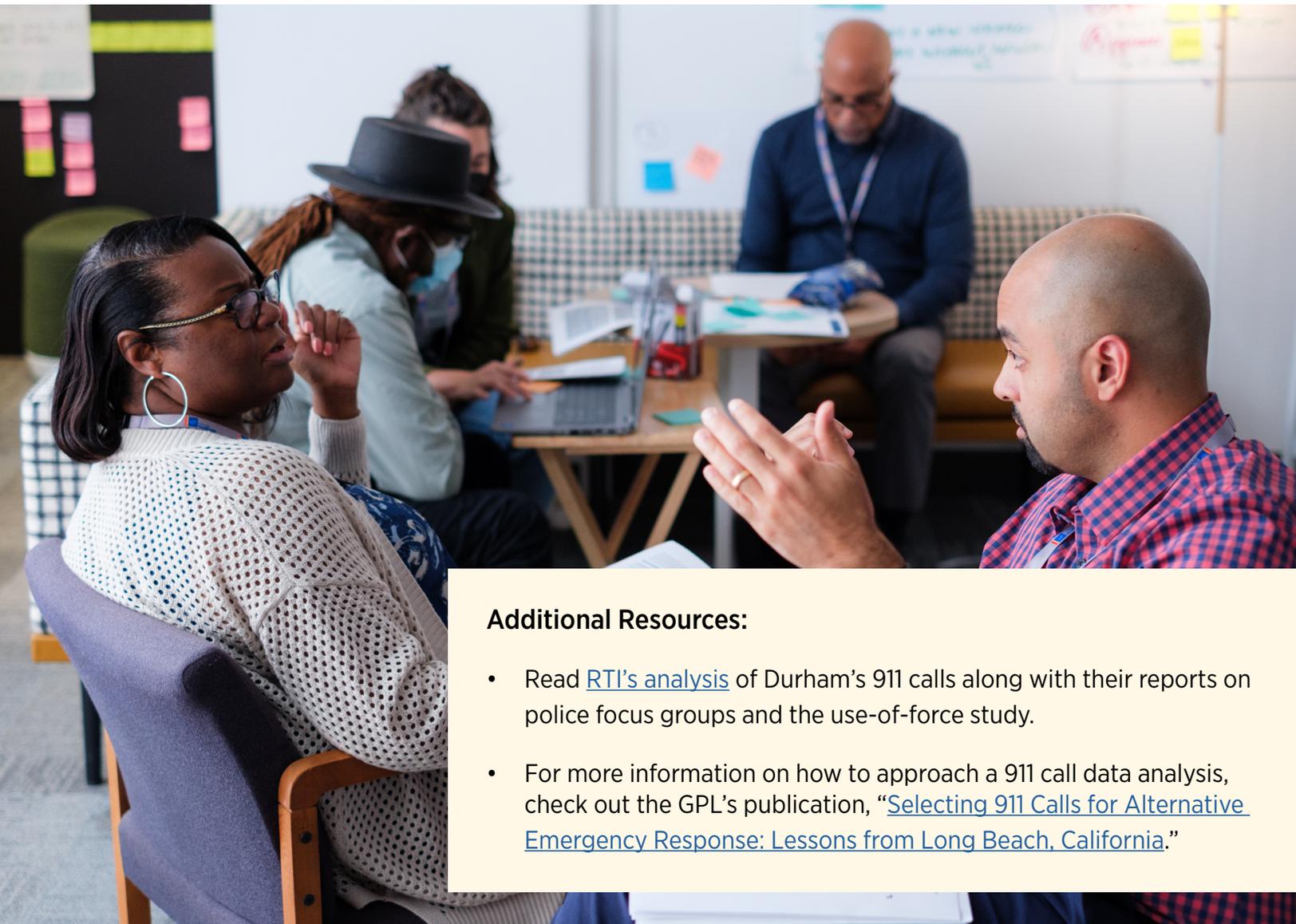
Analyzing Data: Ask Yourself

- What questions do we need our call data to answer?
- Can we do this analysis or do we need outside help?
- [Which agencies](#) do we need data from?
- Who needs to be involved in these conversations?



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DCSD Assistant Director Anise Vance speaks with his team during a brainstorming session.



Additional Resources:

- Read [RTI's analysis](#) of Durham's 911 calls along with their reports on police focus groups and the use-of-force study.
- For more information on how to approach a 911 call data analysis, check out the GPL's publication, "[Selecting 911 Calls for Alternative Emergency Response: Lessons from Long Beach, California.](#)"

What Durham Created: DCSD's 911 Crisis Response Teams

All teams dispatched through Durham's Emergency Communications Center (DECC)

Current Team Hours and Staff	Eligible 911 Call Types	Role of Staff
<p>Crisis Call Diversion (CCD)</p> <p><i>7 days/week, 9 a.m.-9 p.m.</i> Mental health clinicians embedded in the 911 center.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suicide threat • Mental health crisis • Other calls involving behavioral health concerns 	<p>Provide over-the-phone support on 911 calls: Assess caller's needs, complete safety plans, connect people to mental health support, and help identify an appropriate emergency response.</p>
<p>Community Response Team (CRT)</p> <p><i>7 days/week 9:15 a.m.-11:45 p.m.</i> Team of three: A mental health clinician, a peer support specialist, and an emergency medical technician (EMT).</p>	<p>The following calls where the person is not in possession of a weapon or physically violent toward others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suicide threat • Mental health crisis • Trespass • Urgent/non-urgent welfare check • Intoxicated person • Panhandling/Nuisance • Prostitution³ • Public indecency • Lost person 	<p>Deliver person-centered, trauma-informed care to the scene of 911 calls, and transport neighbors to the appropriate community-based care when necessary.</p>
<p>Co-Response (COR)</p> <p><i>7 days/week 6 a.m.-9 p.m.</i> Team of two: A licensed clinician and a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT)-trained police officer riding together in an unmarked police car.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempted suicide • Custody issue • Involuntary commitment • <i>Any of the following where there is an increased risk of violence and/or a weapon is present:</i> Trespass, Intoxicated person, Panhandling/Nuisance, Indecency/Lewdness, Prostitution, Physical or verbal Disturbance, Harassment, Threat, Reckless activity, Abuse, and Domestic violence. 	<p>Respond to 911 calls where there is a higher risk of violence, support de-escalation, connect neighbors to community-based care, and provide additional support to the neighbor in crisis and/or their family members in cases of involuntary commitment.</p>
<p>Involuntary Commitment Response Team (IRT)</p> <p><i>In pilot phase with limited availability.</i> Team of two: A mental health clinician licensed to perform in-field exams and an EMT.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls where the need for an involuntary commitment may be indicated. 	<p>Provide timely mental health evaluations in the field that assess whether someone meets the criteria for involuntary commitment, and ensure that individuals and families receive follow-up support and connection to ongoing care.</p>

3. Here, we use the term "prostitution" to align with the official call code terminology employed by DECC, as referencing specific call code names is helpful for practitioners. However, we support the use of the preferred and less stigmatizing term, "sex work."

2. Program Home: How did you decide where to house your program?

Alternative programs are typically housed in one of three places: an existing social services department like a health, housing, or human services department; in a public safety department like police, fire, or emergency medical services (EMS); or a new stand-alone department.

Durham leaders determined the best option for the city was to create a new stand-alone department, the Durham Community Safety Department (DCSD). Through discussions with community representatives, DCSD leadership learned the public wanted something different and new, outside of traditional public response. Leaders also said they were motivated to act quickly, which was possible because of their specific city structure.

When considering where this new program should live, leaders determined that it was most important that their new program sit shoulder to shoulder with the city's existing public safety departments, be fully integrated into all public safety systems and technology, and possess authority to directly hire staff.

Jurisdictions can go through the following process to help decide where to house your program: **1) Assess strength of support, 2) Determine the timeline, 3) Evaluate advantages of each housing option.**

The DCSD leadership team brainstorms together.



1. Assess strength of support

Durham's Approach: In the summer of 2020, Durham residents held [weeks-long demonstrations](#) against racial injustice in policing and other criminal legal institutions following several high-profile police killings of Black Americans. The city manager emerged as a vocal proponent and driving force in response to resident demands for a major transformation in how Durham responded to 911 calls. The city manager cultivated buy-in with city council members and other government officials, which led to efforts to research and develop solutions. These factors contributed to high levels of funding and the support to create a more comprehensive program.

Assessing Support: Ask Yourself

- Who in the community is advocating for this program?
- What are they asking for?
- Which government leader or department is advocating for this program?
- Where is this program on their list of priorities?



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2. Determine your timeline

Durham's Approach: Durham's council-manager form of government allowed the city manager to fast-track the creation of a new public safety department. Other forms of governance may require a lengthy and complex process to take similar action.

3. Evaluate advantages of each housing option

Durham's Approach: Leaders said they wanted a program that could run pilots, quickly test them, and iterate on results to develop the best response for Durham's needs. They knew that housing the program in its own department would enable the program to adjust more quickly, rather than requiring it to work through approval processes of a department with additional hierarchies and leadership focused on other priorities. High levels of community advocacy and government support for significant change also drove city leaders to advocate for something that would be recognized as a core city entity, separate from existing public safety departments, and a permanent part of the city's public safety services.

Evaluating Housing Options: Ask Yourself



*PROMPT: If we housed a new program in the _____ ,
(Insert potential housing option)*

Stability

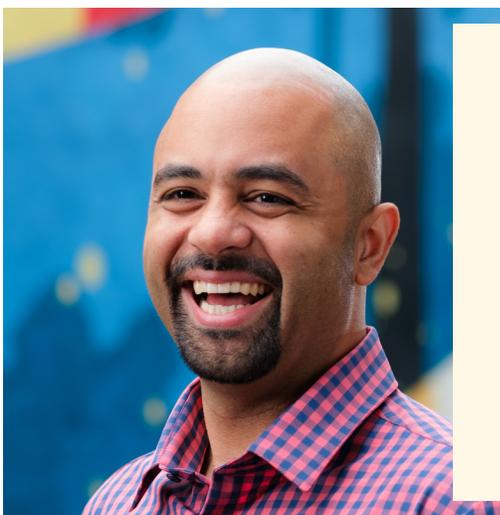
- ...would it be responsive to what our community has asked for regarding an alternative public safety option?
- ...would it be seen as equal in stature to existing public service entities?
- ...could it remain a permanent part of the city structure?
- ...could it maintain stable funding?
- ...could it focus primary goals and daily actions on connecting community members to care?

Technology

- ...could we easily integrate into the existing 911 system?
- ...could we access existing communication technology for public safety responders?
- ...could we collect the data we need to be able to pivot and adjust our approach?

Ownership

- ...could we make decisions without approval by leaders outside alternative response?
- ...could we quickly iterate on our program model and solutions without approval from leaders outside alternative response?
- ...could we develop and implement strategy focused solely on the goals of alternative response?
- ...could we maintain our own database?
- ...could we define roles and directly hire our own staff?



“Every city department has essential duties that must come first, making it tough for new programs to thrive within those existing structures. The city expects police to address crime, fire departments to fight fires, and for us to do something different. A new department just made sense.”

— Anise Vance, DCSD Assistant Director

3. Staffing Model: How did you decide whether to staff your team with city employees or work with a contracted provider?

Alternative response teams can be staffed and run by government employees, a contracted provider, or a mixture of both. In Durham, leaders decided to directly hire all DCSD employees rather than contract with existing local providers.

Jurisdictions can consider the following actions when deciding how to staff their alternative response programs: **1) Determine local response needs, 2) Assess your existing service landscape, and 3) Decide how important ownership over staffing decisions is to you.**

1. Determine local response needs

Durham's Approach: Durham analyzed three years of the city's 911 call data to better understand local needs. The analysis identified a wide range of calls that did not require an armed response. Those calls included mental and behavioral health calls, minor traffic incidents, quality of life calls, and calls for general assistance. This highlighted a mismatch between the skills needed to resolve these calls and the responses available in Durham.

Determining Local Needs: Ask Yourself

- Which 911 calls exhibit a gap between the caller or client's needs and the responder's skill set?
- What skills and services are needed to respond to these types of calls?
- Which professions have those skills and provide those services?



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2. Assess your existing service landscape

Durham's Approach: Durham already had a network of service providers with relevant expertise. However, city leaders learned from their call analysis that their alternative response program would need to provide multiple types of responses to 911 calls that were not offered by existing entities.

Assessing Service Landscape: Ask Yourself

- What social service organizations already exist in our area?
- Do those organizations provide the 911 response options we want for our program?
- Do they have the capacity to handle the volume of calls we expect to divert to alternative response?
- Have they shown a willingness to work with other stakeholders?



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3. Decide how important ownership over staffing decisions is to you

Durham's Approach: Leaders needed to be able to quickly and easily modify programming because their alternative response model was designed to test innovative solutions to entrenched problems. This flexibility included the ability to rapidly modify key staffing processes, which could be streamlined by hiring staff directly instead of having to negotiate a contract modification with an external provider every time a change was needed.

Determining Staffing Decisions: Ask Yourself

- How important is creating and managing our program's staffing and team culture?
- How much oversight of day-to-day operations do we want to have?



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Members of HEART pose for a photo.



4. Team Structure: How did you approach hiring and developing an organizational structure?

Jurisdictions must identify the positions needed to lead their alternative response programs, respond to 911 calls, and support team operations. They must also develop an organizational structure that supports the program's goals.

Jurisdiction leaders can consider role-specific factors when approaching **1) Leadership hires, 2) Staff hires, and 3) Organizational structure.**

1. Leadership Hires

Department Director

The first position many jurisdictions hire is the program or department director. Some skills to consider in seeking the right candidate include:

- **Experience developing new programs:** Developing a new program requires working in information gaps and nuance, managing multiple priorities simultaneously, and generating innovative solutions to longstanding complex problems. A director with experience in program development can anticipate obstacles and streamline processes to move things along more quickly.
- **Experience using data to measure and drive performance:** Data reporting and data-driven performance strategies help leaders assess how a program is performing as services are being delivered, allowing for real-time improvements that ensure programs remain effective and responsive to community needs. A person at the helm of the organization who values and understands both functions can increase the likelihood of ongoing support and success by clearly articulating and leveraging program data during discussions with funders and the community.
- **Ability to work well with key stakeholders:** Alternative response programs must operate in close coordination with other government and private entities. Programs must often develop data-sharing agreements with public safety entities, conduct cross-agency training, and co-develop policies and protocols. Successfully managing these efforts requires skillful relationship building and the ability to collaborate with diverse stakeholders.

Durham's Approach: Durham's hire for the DCSD director position previously served as the city's Innovation Team (I-Team) director where he developed solutions to problems faced by people impacted by the criminal legal system. City leaders said I-Team programs were notable for having strong data-driven performance practices. Success in that position also required ongoing collaboration with many of the same stakeholders involved in alternative response.

Other leadership roles

Jurisdictions may also consider additional leadership positions to carry out the mandate of the department.

Durham's Approach: Once Durham's director was in place, they identified core needs for designing and launching the program and began building out the department with leadership roles to meet those needs. The director's first four hires were:

- **Administrative specialist:** Responsible for managing internal business systems, including payroll, invoices, purchases, and contracts management.
- **Community-centered design strategist:** Responsible for leading program design, including conducting and facilitating community workshops.
- **Assistant director:** Responsible for developing data and performance systems and providing broad support to the director.
- **Operations administrator:** Responsible for designing and implementing dispatch operations as well as fleet and supply management.

2. Staff Hires

Jurisdictions will need to hire front-line staff to respond to calls and perform the administrative duties necessary to support the department's operations.

Durham's Approach: To understand staffing needs, Durham's department leadership requested organization charts from local agencies responding to 911 calls and managing vehicle fleets. They collected position descriptions from other agencies across the country that were already running alternative response programs. They also gathered information through community listening sessions about the types of skills, experience, and expertise Durham residents hoped responders would possess.

Using this information, DCSD leadership identified the full-time equivalent (FTE) staff roles needed to launch response teams. For a deeper look, read our publication specifically focused on DCSD's staffing decisions.

<i>Administrative Staff (5 FTE)</i>	<i>Responder Staff (15 FTE + 3 grant-funded FTE)</i>
1 director	2 clinical managers to supervise all response units
1 assistant director	9 licensed clinical social workers
1 community-centered designer	4 peer support specialists
1 operations administrator	3 EMTs
1 administrative specialist	

3. Organizational Structure

An organizational structure can support a program’s mission by identifying decision-making authority, setting roles and responsibilities, facilitating collaboration, and streamlining workflow.

Durham’s Approach: As DCSD grew, leaders grouped leadership and staff into three separate divisions to support program operations.

Division	Roles and Responsibilities
Operations and Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides essential support services for 911 response teams. • Includes an operations administrator who conducts data analysis and manages key operational systems including DCSD’s integration in CAD, and an operations professional who oversees the department’s fleet of vehicles and manages crisis supply inventory like EMT bags and vehicle supplies. • Includes the Learning and Iteration Team (LIT Team), which identifies areas ripe for program iteration and is key to DCSD’s practice of continuous process improvement. • Includes business services staff who manage contracts, procurement, payroll, and other crucial business functions.
Stabilization Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Houses a variety of service-focused teams meant to provide both proactive and reactive support to Durham residents in need of support, including street outreach, reentry support, and an office of survivor care that supports people in the wake of gun violence. • The goal of these teams is to connect residents to longer-term services that meet their needs and help them stabilize in the community.
911 Crisis Response Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes all response staff for the Crisis Call Diversion, Co-Response, and Community Responder teams. • While a clinical license holder is not required to be on a team, all teams’ operations are supervised by a clinical manager. • Teams operate across six shifts. Shift supervisors oversee and provide support to a mix of active response teams on each shift (e.g., CCD, COR, CRT, and IRT), with a shift supervisor licensed to perform in-field exams for any shift with an IRT unit working.

Creating Organizational Structure: Ask Yourself

- What are the core functions of our program?
- How can these functions be grouped logically considering factors such as duties, the need to collaborate, and the final decision-maker?



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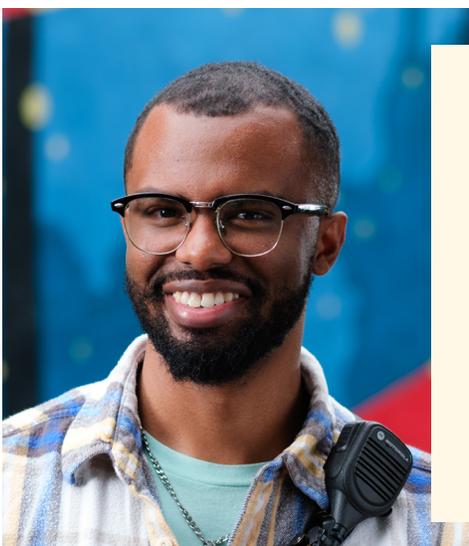


“When we got started, I was entirely focused on building the essential administration and operational systems so we could hit the ground running. Since then, we’ve been really deliberate about growing our team in ways that directly support our expanding needs.”

— John Zimmerman, DCSD Operations Administrator

“Our team was built to quickly connect neighbors in crisis to targeted support, drawing on a deep understanding of Durham’s services. We’ve learned people need clear, personalized information — not an overwhelming list of options — so we focus on sharing only what’s most relevant to their needs.”

— Leah Gladlin, DCSD Community Partnerships Coordinator



“As a [911 Response Services] shift supervisor, my teams reach out to me anytime they hit a snag in the field. Each type of response deals with different situations, so getting to work with all of them means I can tap in to all our program has to offer when I’m figuring out solutions, instead of just relying on the tools or approaches of one team.”

— Kirby Jones, DCSD Crisis Response Shift Supervisor

5. Funding Sources: How do you fund your program for the long term?

Alternative response programs are funded through a mix of sources including local and state tax revenue, short-term funding such as stimulus dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) or grants and Medicaid reimbursement.

DCSD is primarily funded with local tax dollars allocated through the city's general fund and does not rely heavily on one-time funding or short-term grants. Leaders prepare for annual budget conversations with the city by leveraging real-time program data and engaging in outreach strategies throughout the year to proactively demonstrate the program's value to funders.

Jurisdictions may consider several strategies when developing a funding plan: **1) Secure a primary long-term funding source, 2) Structure grants as sustainable funding, and 3) Strategically use short-term grants.**

Secure a primary long-term funding source

Durham's Approach: Because Durham designated DCSD as an essential city service, its budget is included in the city's general fund — a renewable fund supported by local taxes. As a designated recipient of general fund dollars, DCSD is required to present a proposed budget to the city each year, in which they can request extra funds. For more information on how Durham sets itself up for success in year-round budget conversations, please see **Appendix A.**

Securing Long-Term Funding: Ask Yourself

- What long-term funding sources are available to us?
- What are the timelines of these funding sources?
- How can we prepare for budget changes over time?



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Examples of long-term funding in other jurisdictions

- **State-level funding:** In 2021, Washington's state legislature passed a [bill](#) to create the [Crisis Response Improvement Strategy Committee and Steering Committee](#), which are charged with developing legislation to support behavioral health and suicide prevention efforts across the state. The efforts are funded by a [telecommunications tax](#).
- **County and City special taxes:** In 2018, voters in Douglas County, Kansas, approved a 1/4-cent [behavioral health sales tax](#) to support mental health and substance abuse services in the county, bringing in an estimated \$4.9 million annually. The same year, voters in Denver, Colorado, approved a [ballot measure](#) for a .25% increase in sales and use tax to fund behavioral health services.
- **Medicaid reimbursements:** Denver, Colorado, and Dane County, Wisconsin, use Medicaid to fund some of their alternative response programs. Access to Medicaid reimbursement depends on a state's Medicaid policies, including Medicaid expansion, as well as a program's ability to bill Medicaid, which can require additional staff and skills.

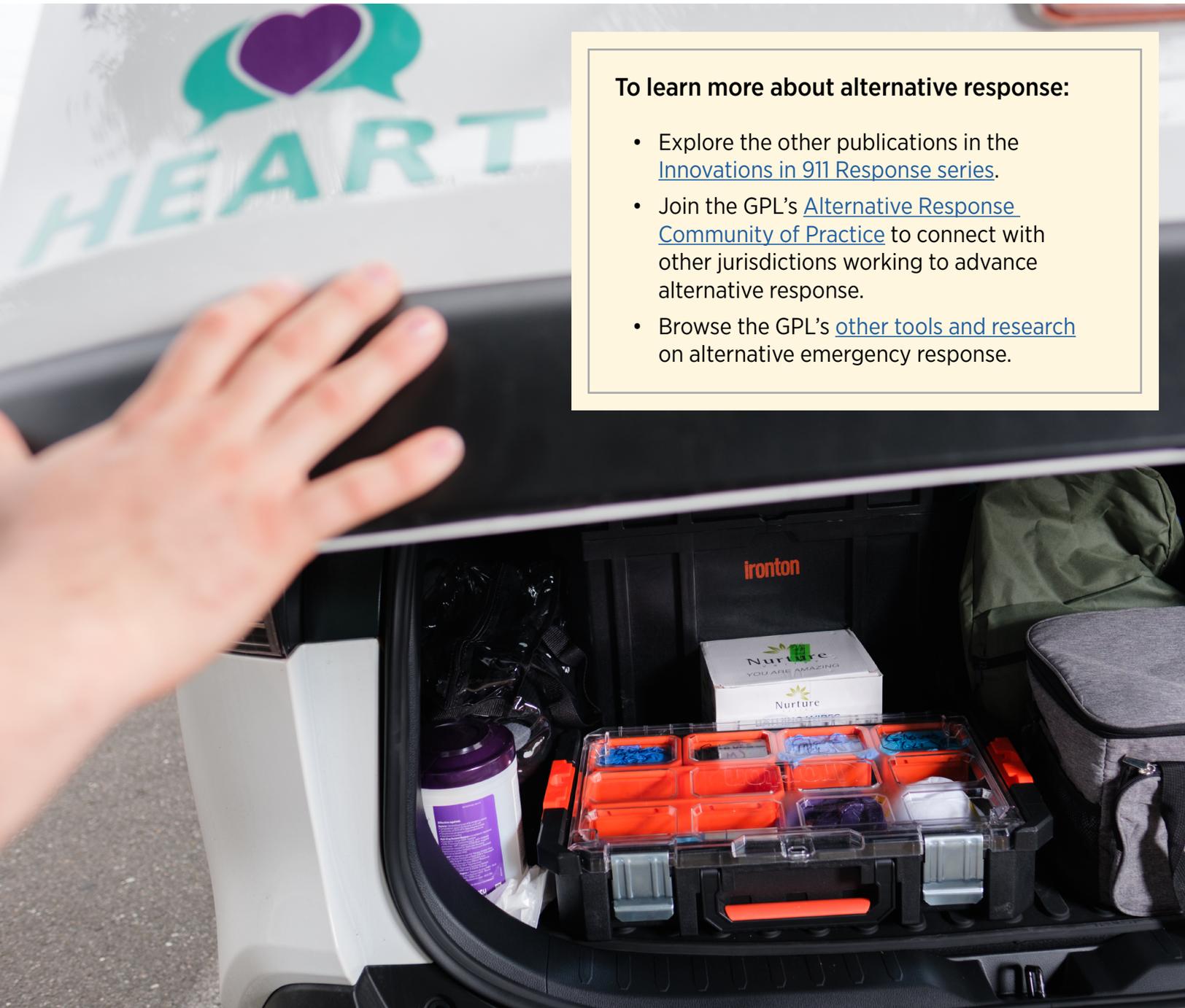
Structure grants as sustainable funding

Durham's Approach: For grants that fund new pilots, such as DCSD's new Involuntary Commitment Response Team, DCSD works with the city to structure the grant so Durham gradually assumes a greater share of the total cost of the grant over time. This ensures DCSD can fully support the funding expenditure as a regular part of its annual budget by the end of the grant period. DCSD accomplishes this by having regular conversations with all stakeholders throughout the process to ensure the proposal is understood, expected, and transparent at the time the city council votes on it.

Strategically use short-term grants

Durham's Approach: DCSD may use one-time, nonrenewable grants for one-time expenses, such as radios, vehicles, or other equipment.

A HEART responder shuts the trunk of a response vehicle, which contains supplies to meet residents' needs.



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.

Appendix A: Setting yourself up for success in budget conversations

Leaders of alternative response programs will engage with potential funders. A key to success in these conversations is having a program that is highly visible, clearly understood, and shows measurable impact.

Jurisdictions may consider engaging in the following actions to support funding conversations:

Provide ongoing reporting throughout the year.

Durham's Approach: During its first two years in operation, DCSD submitted quarterly progress reports as part of the city manager's strategic planning process. The reports served as the basis for discussion sessions hosted by the city manager's office that included deputy city manager and city budget and finance leadership. At the sessions, DCSD leadership presented its report, discussed whether DCSD was reaching its targets, and received guidance from city leadership. This process allowed DCSD to rapidly address problems, streamline solutions by quickly accessing city resources, and maintain high visibility with the city manager's office, which is responsible for developing the proposed city budget. Although DCSD no longer provides quarterly reports to the city manager's office, it now provides weekly updates, including program highlights, to the city manager's office along with other city departments.

Providing Ongoing Reporting: Ask Yourself

- Who are the decision-makers for the budget in our jurisdiction?
- What is the best way to provide decision-makers with key program information?



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Other ongoing visibility strategies

Durham's Approach:

- **Accessible Data:** DCSD maintains a [public dashboard](#) that reports regularly updated metrics like total responses and top call types, average time to and on scene, and percentage of encounters where responders reported feeling safe. It also provides [quarterly data cards](#) to the public through its website that detail key program data in an easy-to-read format.
- **Strategic Storytelling:** DCSD leadership worked early on to craft the language used to describe the program to the public. They avoided any language that would be detrimental to relationships with other city stakeholders, such as the police, and made sure to clearly describe the purpose and origin of the program to build support with the community. DCSD now works closely with the city's public affairs and communications staff to regularly bring in media to [learn about and report](#) on their work. DCSD has also been featured on a [podcast](#) and is the subject of a [documentary](#).
- **Experiential Learning Opportunities:** DCSD offers ride-along opportunities to city manager's office staff and city council members to provide firsthand insight into what responders are doing in the field.

Designing Visibility Strategies: Ask Yourself

- What information does our community most need to know?
- How can we get them that information?



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Annual budget requests and presentations

Durham's Approach: DCSD's budget requests include three key elements:

1. The goal of the request (*e.g., to serve more Durham residents*).
2. How DCSD proposed to reach that goal with the requested funding (*e.g., hire two additional responders to work during peak hours for trespassing calls*).
3. What data supports the request (*e.g., DCSD was unable to respond to 5,000 calls last year due to limited staff and operational hours*).
4. DCSD will often provide a second funding option and what the trade-offs for the lower amount of funding would be (*e.g., hire one additional responder and forego responses overnight*).

DCSD also demonstrates transparency by clearly stating where budget estimates have changed and explaining the reason for the change. DCSD does not suggest how items should be funded. This allows the department to maintain strong relationships with budget decision-makers and other departments by avoiding speculation on whether funding could be reallocated from an existing recipient.

Creating Budget Requests: Ask Yourself

- Do our funding requests clearly state the potential benefits of the funding and provide supporting data?



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“If you lead a department, it is your job to help the city manager and council make really informed choices about city funding. That means making a thorough case for what you need, supplying multiple options with trade-offs, and always being as transparent as possible.”

— Ryan Smith, DCSD Director

Appendix B: DCSD's 2025-26 General Fund Budget Snapshot

Program Details

Operations:

- Citywide
- 7 days a week
- At least 12 hours a day (depending on program)

Call response metrics:

- DCSD programs responded to 20,655 calls in FY 24-25
- With current operating hours and staffing numbers:
 - Crisis Call Diversion takes 82% of all eligible calls
 - Crisis Response Team responds to 53% of all eligible calls
 - Co-Response responds to 10% of all eligible calls

Budget Snapshot

Total budget: \$10,997,741

Full-time employee (FTE) positions: 75

Administration/operations: 11

First Response: 42

- Management: 10
- Crisis Call Diversion: 3
- Crisis Response Team: 26 (~8 teams of 3)
- Co-Response: 3
- Involuntary Commitment Response Team: Included in other programs' FTE

Stabilization Services: 22

- Management: 2
- Care Navigation: 7
- Welcome Home: 2
- Street Outreach/Familiar Neighbors: 6
- Housing Opportunities & Pathways Engagement: 5
- Office of Survivor Care: Included in other programs' FTE
- Involuntary Commitment Response Team: Included in other programs' FTE

Additional Resource:

- [2026 Durham budget and organizational chart](#) (beginning on page 202)



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

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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