

Building an Alternative First Response

A proposal to enhance community safety and well-being

May 2023

There is broad agreement in Gainesville and Alachua County that incarceration should not be the answer to problems rooted in mental illness or addiction. Despite this consensus, and a lot of good work by local officials, our community is failing to provide the right response at the right time for many people experiencing social and medical issues such as a behavioral health crisis. As a result, hundreds of people are locked away every year instead of being connected to the services they need.

The human cost of this failure is enormous. A January 2022 report by the University of South Florida found that 295 of the 843 people in the Alachua County Jail, or 35%, were classified as having mental health conditions.¹ And since they had substantially lower rates of pretrial release, those individuals with mental health conditions had been kept in jail even longer than people who had already been sentenced.² The end result is that the jail holds more people with mental health conditions than all the local treatment facilities combined.³

There is also a substantial financial cost. Consider, for example, that Alachua County spent roughly \$39.1 million to operate the jail in 2022.⁴ The figures above suggest that over one-third of that cost, or \$13.7 million, was for incarcerating hundreds of people with mental illness. By comparison, County spending on its Community Support Services division - which includes programs that offer mental health support and housing assistance - was about \$14.7 million.⁵

Links Not Locks, a campaign of Community Spring, was born out of this disconnect between our community's values and its actions when it comes to supporting people with behavioral health conditions. We envision a community that doesn't use incarceration as the answer to public health issues but instead connects people to mental, behavioral, and cultural resources that are rooted in the community. While we recognize that there are many steps required to fully disentangle the behavioral health and criminal legal systems, our campaign is focused on reducing stigma and expanding programming for mental health and pre-arrest diversion.

¹ University of South Florida, [Alachua County, Florida - Sequential Intercept Mapping Report](#), page 17.

² *Ibid*, pages 15 and 17.

³ There are 232 in-patient behavioral health beds in our community between Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, UF Health, North Florida Regional and the VA Medical Center. Alachua County Behavioral Health Transportation Plan 2023-2026, page 4.

⁴ [Alachua County Board of County Commissioners](#), Meeting on March 14, 2023, Backup materials for Agenda Item 5, "FY24 Budget Development - Board Focus Issues & Historical Trends."

⁵ *Ibid*.

We believe that the most important change that we need to make in our community is at a first responder level, which can put someone on a path to either care or a cage. Even with the best intentions and training, when armed police are the primary response to a behavioral health crisis, there is significant risk of trauma, physical harm and arrest. **That's why we want to build a community response by non-police, alternative first responders that can divert people from jail and connect them to the support they need to thrive.**

Rethinking First Responders

It can be hard to appreciate the scale of the work that is currently being handled by police and EMS. Alachua County's Combined Communication Center, which manages the 911 system, processed nearly 380,000 emergency and non-emergency calls in 2021.⁶ Over 270,000 resulted in a request for service, which translates to more than 700 requests per day.⁷ The scope of what the police are expected to handle has also grown over the years to include many non-emergency, quality-of-life issues, such as noise complaints and welfare checks.

Over the last several years, there has been a growing recognition that a significant portion of 911 calls are not emergencies or threats to public safety, but would instead be better served by a response from behavioral health professionals. For instance, calls for suspicious persons, disorderly conduct or trespassing often stem from medical or social issues rather than criminal behavior that requires police involvement. Analysis from other jurisdictions suggests that between 33 and 68% of 911 calls fall into this category and could be handled without the police.⁸

In response, dozens of communities nationwide, including at least three in Florida, have launched programs that send behavioral health professionals instead of the police to these types of calls. Many of them have now concluded their pilot phases and are further expanding services. Similar to how EMS was first developed about 50 years ago in response to a gap in services, these programs represent another type of first responders.⁹ Various called a "community response," "crisis response" or "street response," the idea underlying all of these programs is the same - teams of civilians who are professionally trained to handle non-emergency social and medical issues.

To provide just a few examples:

- CAHOOTS has provided an alternative first response in Eugene, Oregon for more than 30 years with teams of medics and mental health professionals. Out of over 24,000 annual calls, only 1% require police backup.¹⁰

⁶ Alachua County Sheriff's Office, [2021 Annual Report](#), page 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Center for American Progress, [The Community Responder Model](#).

⁹ Emergency Medicine Residents' Association, [EMS History](#).

¹⁰ White Bird Clinic, [CAHOOTS Media Guide 2020](#), page 2.

- In St. Petersburg, the Community Assistance and Life Liaison (CALL) program responds to 911 calls that are related to medical or social issues like mental health crises, homelessness and neighbor disputes. In its first year, CALL responded to over 4,300 calls and diverted over 1,200 people from the emergency room.¹¹
- The Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) in Denver responds to non-emergency issues with teams of medics and mental health professionals. It has expanded significantly since launching in 2020, responding to 4,700 calls last year.¹²

On a local level, several related programs have recently been developed or expanded. These include the co-responder programs that pair police with clinicians from Meridian Behavioral Services, the Alachua County Crisis Center’s Mobile Response Team, Gainesville Fire Rescue’s Community Resource Paramedicine program and Grace Marketplace’s Street Outreach Team. While this progress has been encouraging, the narrow scope of these programs means that our community continues to respond to many social and medical issues with police instead of care.

Envisioning a Community Response

It is time to build a coordinated community response, with teams of mental health clinicians and medics (as well as social workers and peers when possible) that can be dispatched via 911, 988 and a non-emergency line for low-risk, non-emergency calls.

A common response to this idea is, “That’s already happening here.” While it’s true that there is excellent work being done by the local programs mentioned above, their impact is limited because they are uncoordinated, inaccessible or incomplete. When you call for help right now, it can feel like a gamble on what response you’ll get. There is no central coordination of these resources at 911 dispatch or elsewhere, with only occasional ad hoc communication between the different programs. They are also not easily accessible to the public, with only the co-responder programs (which include the police) being dispatchable from 911. Finally, in most cases, the currently available programs can offer support with either mental health, substance use or case management, but not all three. Most are not available 24/7 and cannot transport people to services, which is one of the most critical components of community responder programs in many other places.

We need to pull together the great work that’s already happening into a coordinated community response of behavioral health teams that are easily accessible via 911, 988 and a non-emergency line. People in crisis often have complicated, overlapping needs, and it’s important that all the necessary support services are available to them in real time, whether that is mental health, physical health or just help navigating various programs and systems.

¹¹ Vera Institute, [The People Responding to 911 Calls Instead of Police](#).

¹² WellPower, Support Team Assisted Response (STAR), wellpower.org/star-program.

Building an effective community response could take several forms. While it could mean creating an entirely new program, it could also be achieved by expanding programs that already exist and making them more coordinated and accessible. For example, it could involve an expansion of the Alachua County Crisis Center's Mobile Response Team, which provides 24/7 mental health crisis support, but lacks medics. Alternatively, it could build on the work of Gainesville Fire Rescue's Community Resource Paramedicine program, which offers support for non-emergency medical and substance use issues, but does not include a mental health clinician. Or it could be some combination of these options. Answering these design questions and establishing a more exact framework for this new form of first responders will require many additional conversations between policymakers and the community.

Finally, it's worth noting that a community response for low-risk, non-emergency calls does not require ending current programs such as the co-responders. As seen in places like Albuquerque, there are still many emergency calls that require a police response, and many of those calls would benefit from the inclusion of a mental health clinician.¹³

Benefits of a Community Response

An alternative first responder program would offer substantial benefits not only for people with behavioral health conditions, but also the police and the broader community by:

- Connecting people to necessary services - Research has shown that these programs are effective at increasing the use of community-based services.¹⁴ This makes sense given that the teams are trained to do exactly that, and have more opportunities to build trust and offer ongoing support to people during a crisis and afterward.
- Reducing trauma and the risk of physical harm - Interactions with police can be inherently traumatizing for some people, causing them to resist calling 911 even in emergencies. And no matter how well-trained or well-intentioned police officers are, there is a very real danger to having an armed response to a behavioral health crisis. For people with untreated mental illness, the risk of being killed by the police is 16 times greater than other members of the community.¹⁵
- Reducing suffering and costs by diverting people from jail - At nearly \$48,000 per year, holding someone in the Alachua County Jail is incredibly expensive.¹⁶ It also involves a

¹³ Albuquerque Community Safety Department, [FY2022 Organizational Plan](#).

¹⁴ Vera Institute, [Crisis Response Services for People with Mental Illnesses or Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#), page 44.

¹⁵ Treatment Advocacy Center, [Overlooked in the Undercounted](#), page 1.

¹⁶ In 2021, Alachua County spent \$36.2 million on the jail, which had an average daily population of 761 people. [Alachua County Board of County Commissioners](#), Meeting on March 14, 2023, Backup materials

lot of unnecessary suffering for the many people who would be more appropriately served by the behavioral health system. Local co-responder programs have already demonstrated that many calls do not require a police presence, as over 80% of the calls they responded to did not result in arrest. This progress could be further expanded by community responder teams that are not authorized to arrest anyone in the first place, and are instead solely focused on connecting people to services.

- Reducing the burden on the emergency medical system - Alternative first responder programs have been shown to reduce unnecessary emergency hospitalizations, which can result in huge cost savings.¹⁷ For example, the CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon saved the local emergency medical system about \$14 million in 2019 alone.¹⁸
- Increasing public safety by allowing police to focus on police work - A community responder program would also free up time and money that police currently spend on social and medical issues that are not a threat to public safety. That's why police departments in cities like Denver and LA support community responder programs.¹⁹

Working Toward a Community Response

Our community already has the energy and resources to build an effective alternative first responder program. What we need now is coordination and commitment. Since Alachua County oversees both 911 via the Combined Communication Center and 988 via the Crisis Center, it makes sense for it to take the lead in advancing this work.

That's why we're asking Alachua County to work toward developing a pilot program that can launch by the end of 2024. With their leadership, our community can enhance public safety and well-being by building a new kind of first response, with non-police, behavioral health professionals providing people the care and support they deserve.

To learn more, visit csgnv.org/communityresponse or see the resources below.

- Center for American Progress, [The Community Responder Model](#)
- Vera Institute, [Behavioral Health Crisis Alternatives](#) & [Civilian Crisis Response](#)
- Brennan Center for Justice, [Rethinking How Law Enforcement Is Deployed](#)
- The Council of State Governments, [Expanding First Response](#)

for Agenda Item 5, "FY24 Budget Development - Board Focus Issues & Historical Trends." Alachua County Sheriff's Office, [2021 Annual Report](#), page 33.

¹⁷ Vera Institute, [Crisis Response Services for People with Mental Illnesses or Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#), page 44.

¹⁸ White Bird Clinic, [CAHOOTS Media Guide 2020](#), page 5.

¹⁹ The Council of State Governments, Expanding First Response, [Program Highlights - Denver](#). AP News, [Los Angeles police union proposes limits to 911 responses](#).