

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP)

Strategies for First Responder-led Community Engagement

October 2023

By the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE)

The National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE) is dedicated to bridging communications between policing entities and the local communities their members serve. NOBLE recognizes that the level of responsibility that the law enforcement profession across the nation faces has never been greater. This article documents the topics discussed in two Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) webinars in which NOBLE participated and offers innovative solutions designed to change the culture of policing into one in which reform reflects equity, competence, and confidence in order to meet the evolving needs of communities. This article features the opinions of some of the nation's top law enforcement officials and key community support professionals—the people who guide and form the path that community policing needs now and into the future.

Introduction

Law enforcement officers and other first responders are often the first on the scene at crime scenes and situations of distress across the United States. In these emergency situations, specialized training allows these highly skilled individuals to make discretionary decisions at critical moments of people's lives. Providing these crucial frontline workers with resources, training, and support is at the heart of effecting systemic change at the front end of the justice system. In lieu of arrest, law enforcement officers connected to deflection and pre-arrest diversion initiatives can opt to route a nonviolent offender into treatment, services, or other alternative initiatives that save lives, unplug the courts, and move policing toward a true partnership that ensures safe communities. Despite the success of these evidence-based practices, some law enforcement officers must be convinced to utilize referrals to effectively reach vulnerable populations, their families, and the communities they respond to. In addition, law enforcement officers must engage with their

communities in meaningful ways to earn their trust. Law enforcement officers and other first responders are uniquely positioned to identify opportunities for deflection and offer pathways to recovery that truly may save more lives.

The Need for Deflection and Pre-arrest Diversion

Deflection and pre-arrest diversion are collaborative prevention and intervention efforts, in which law enforcement officers and other first responders (fire and emergency medical services personnel) partner with behavioral health systems to connect individuals with stimulant and other substance use or mental health issues or co-occurring issues to community-based treatment and services. Such initiatives can eliminate unnecessary involvement in the justice system for individuals with these issues by offering opportunities for them to be connected to treatment and services. Such initiatives and related community engagement activities can help lower the rate of adolescent arrest, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, and minimize the “school-to-prison pipeline” through substance use prevention education and positive interactions with law enforcement officers.

What a Deflection Program Looks Like

Law enforcement officers are the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system. They are easily able to refer individuals to community-based, evidence-based treatment programs and prevention activities. Thus, these officers play a vital role in preventing and intervening in the cycle of offending and advancement through the justice system. A law enforcement-led deflection initiative begins with a substance use

prevention focus, in which resources are offered to address the treatment and service needs of the individual. Of the six pathways of deflection, two that law enforcement officers utilize are explained below.¹

In the First Responder and Officer Referral Pathway of Deflection, during routine activities such as patrol or a response to a service call, the officer engages with the individual and provides treatment referrals instead of immediately filing minor charges or conducting an arrest.

Another opportunity for law enforcement deflection is intervention-focused and is often referred to as pre-arrest diversion or the Officer Intervention Pathway of Deflection. In this type of approach, during routine activities such as patrol or a response to a service call during which charges otherwise would be filed, the law enforcement officer provides a referral to treatment or to a case manager or issues a noncriminal citation to report to a program. Charges are held in abeyance until treatment and/or a social service plan is successfully completed.

Engaging Law Enforcement

Obtaining officer buy-in for deflection initiatives is essential to program success and growth. Strong departmental leadership and informal “champions” or well-respected colleagues encourage buy-in and support for deflection. A departmental culture that prioritizes deflection; provides guidance to officers through training, policies, and procedures; and allows for open channels of communication for crucial conversations is essential for sustaining initiatives.

In the COSSUP webinar “One Key to Program Success: How to Obtain Officer Buy-in for Your First Responder Diversion Program,” Assistant Chief Kevin Hall of the

Tucson, Arizona, Police Department provided detailed guidance on collaborating with officers to obtain the support needed to implement deflection initiatives.

Assistant Chief Hall explained that officer commitment requires working within your specific organizational cultures to garner interest in the program. This can be complex in that coping with the change in mindset from arrest to deflection breaks with an established set of shared beliefs that officers have in their departments. Officers may resist the change from quantitative to qualitative policing. Challenging values and assumptions, especially in police organizations, is tough to do. Assistant Chief Hall advised approaching the change in police culture with patience (in other words, a long-term view), strong leadership, and authentic conversation. Likewise, information sharing through data and a feedback loop (sharing deflection participant successes) play an integral role in developing and executing responses that are timely, forward-thinking, and collaborative.

In this same webinar, Malik R. S. Ashhali observed that a major barrier for law enforcement officers to effectively participate in successful deflection programs is stigma.² The negative impact of stigma severely limits program participation, but officer buy-in is often gained with stigma awareness training.

To create a culture that accepts deflection, Mr. Ashhali recommended that officers first accept that they all have unconscious biases. He encouraged officers to slow down, monitor their own behavior, and pay particular attention to bias related to the nine protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation). He then recommended that officers widen their social circles, speak out if they

notice bias, apologize if they get it wrong, and engage with their community in a visible way. The key to transformation is to develop awareness of how implicit biases impact officers' abilities to establish trust within the communities they serve.

Tips for Reducing Stigma in Law Enforcement

by Malik R. S. Ashhali

The key to transformation is to develop awareness of how implicit biases impact the ability to establish trust within the communities served.

- Accept that everyone has unconscious biases.
- Widen your social circles.
- Speak out if you notice bias.
- Apologize if you “get it wrong” (e.g., verbiage).
- Engage with your community in a highly visible way.

Strategies for Community Engagement

Building trust and maintaining authentic relationships with community members and community partner organizations are critical to maintaining public safety and are also essential to the success of deflection programs.³

As part of his presentations, Mr. Ashhali emphasized the importance of establishing relationships with the community unrelated to arrests. A simple interaction to check on an individual, listen to their perspective, or provide them with assistance can go a long way

toward establishing crucial trust within the community. Mr. Ashhali also suggested that something as simple as volunteering to give a presentation at a casual event can lead to dialogues that are difficult to have but that can get to the root of misunderstanding. These frank conversations make the community feel heard and lead to authentic communication. In addition to cultural diversity training, law enforcement officers are encouraged to build relationships with local community leaders, such as church groups.

Tips for Community Engagement

by **Malik R. S. Ashhali**

To build trust with and engage the community, law enforcement officers can do the following:

- Build individual relationships with community members.
- Be friendly and make a connection.
- Ask people questions.
- Tell people about yourself.
- Go places and do things with community members.
- Accept people the way they are.
- Assume other people want to form relationships.
- Overcome your fear of rejection.

Opportunities for Youth Deflection and Diversion Programs

Substance use, misuse, and addiction are preventable disorders. Although there are known biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors that contribute to the risk, there are opportunities to intervene early in a child's life to prevent substance use disorders and other related problems.⁴

As part of the COSSUP webinar "Engaging Your Community: First Responder Strategies," Cara Evans-Patterson, the Youth Diversion Program Manager at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, Police Department (CMPD), and Veronica "Vicki" Foster, a retired assistant chief of the CMPD, gave a presentation on the department's Youth Diversion Program. The purpose of the program is to offer eligible juveniles an opportunity to avoid prosecution by attending life skills classes or a speciality court for teens ("teen court"), breaking the cycle of juvenile justice involvement and arrest records for first-time misdemeanor offenses.⁵

Since the inception of the Youth Diversion Program at the CMPD in 2012, juvenile arrests have decreased by 43 percent. The program has also seen a 41 percent reduction in racial and ethnic disparities among juveniles who are arrested. The CMPD saw school resource officers refer more than 3,000 juveniles; of the juveniles participating in the CMPD's various diversion programs, 90 percent did not reoffend upon program completion. Program benefits include empowering families through education, direction, and guidance. (Note: Statistics references are from 2021.)

The CMPD also offers many opportunities for law enforcement officers to engage with local youth,

including through the Police Activities League program and afterschool and mentoring programs. Each initiative provides the benefit of positive interactions between youth and police officers.

Areas for Future Improvement to Deflection Programs

More work still needs to be done to strengthen existing deflection programs and support the growth of deflection. For instance, deflection programs have not been universally implemented and more research is needed on the efficacy of law enforcement serving as an entry point to treatment. There is also a lack of education opportunities for law enforcement officers and other first responders on the science of addiction. Lastly, a lack of trust in these types of programs, from the officers and the community itself, hinders the implementation and efficacy of deflection programs.

Conclusion

The aim of deflection and pre-arrest diversion programs is to reduce arrests and improve public health and safety. This is done through critical decision making and fueled by education and engagement. The benefits result in providing linkages to treatment and services to individuals with substance use and mental health issues and lowering system costs. By breaking down barriers to treatment and empowering law enforcement officers and other first responders, deflection and pre-arrest diversion programs serve as liaisons between the justice and behavioral health systems, further crime prevention, and advance safe communities. Buy-in among the police culture is of the utmost importance in successful implementation. Importantly, strong, committed leadership can spur the transformation that leads to increasing trust between law enforcement officers and the communities they serve.

NOBLE is a partner of Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities' (TASC) Center for Health and Justice (CHJ).

Endnotes

1. There are six frameworks, or pathways, of deflection and pre-arrest diversion, each of which uses a different approach to address specific public health and safety challenges faced by communities. These six approaches are referred to as pathways because, in contrast to justice system interventions that mandate that individuals attend treatment, first responders (law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services [EMS]) and community response teams are able to offer access, or pathways, to community-based treatment, services, and resources to support individuals in need.
<https://ptaccollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PTACC-6-Pathways-of-Deflection-Visual.pdf>.
2. Krus, Nathan E., Jaeyong Choi, and Richard H. Donohue. (2020). "Police Officers, Stigma, and the Opioid Epidemic." *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 22(4): 393–406.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461355720962524>.
3. U.S. Department of Justice. "Importance of Police-Community Relationships and Resources for Further Reading." *Community Relations Services Toolkit for Policing*.
<https://www.justice.gov/file/1437336/download>.
4. National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2016). *Principles of Substance Abuse Prevention for Early Childhood: A Research-based Guide*. National Institutes of Health.
<https://archives.nida.nih.gov/publications/principles-substance-abuse-prevention-early-childhood-research-based-guide>.
5. For more information on the Youth Diversion Program at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, visit its website at <https://charlottenc.gov/cmpd/Our-Organization/Youth-Diversion>.

Visit the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives at <https://noblenational.org>.

Visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Center at www.cossup.org.

About COSSUP

COSSUP has transitioned from the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP). This change in title for the program is indicative of efforts to reduce the stigma related to substance use and to support impacted people in their recovery journey.

About TASC's Center for Health and Justice (CHJ)

CHJ helps COSSUP grantees implement evidence-based, systemic solutions at the front end of the justice system to respond to the substance use that often underlies criminal justice involvement. CHJ helps build integrated criminal justice, behavioral health, and community systems by assisting first responders in developing pathways to treatment for individuals at risk for illicit substance use and misuse. CHJ offers online resources and in-person training and technical assistance (TTA) engagements customized to the needs of specific jurisdictions with the goals of connecting and maximizing the treatment resources of the community to improve public health and safety. Request TTA from CHJ by contacting the COSSUP Project Lead, Hope Fiori, at hfiori@tasc.org.

About BJA

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) provides leadership and services in grant administration and criminal justice policy development to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement in achieving safer communities. To learn more about BJA, visit www.bja.gov and follow us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/DOJBJA) and X (formerly known as Twitter) (@DOJBJA). BJA is part of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.

This work was supported by a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.