

Reimagining 911 and Non-Police Crisis Response Work Group Recommendations

Developing a deeper understanding of the needs of people who call 911 to develop recommendations to best address those needs including transitioning 9-1-1 communications from APD to independent or alternate City department management and reimagining a new response system which diverts 9-1-1 calls that come that do not warrant a police response to a non-police crisis line and response team similar to other models other cities.

Contact:

Kathy Mitchell

mitckagardener@yahoo.com

Cate Graziani

cgraziani@harmreductiontx.org

Members:

Priscilla Hale - RPS Task Force Member

Jessica Johnson - RPS Task Force Member

Chas Moore - RPS Task Force Member

Sue Gabriel - RPS Task Force Member

Chris Harris - RPS Task Force Member

Cary Roberts - RPS Task Force Member

Rodney Saenz - RPS Task Force Member

Cate Graziani - RPS Task Force Member

Hailey Easley - RPS Task Force Member

Kristen Lenau - RPS Task Force Member

Kathy Mitchell - RPS Task Force Member

Dawn Handley - RPS Task Force Member

Matt Simpson - RPS Task Force Member

Jen Margulies - Community Member

K. Stellar Dutcher - Community Member

Rachael Shannon - Community Member

Hilda Gutierrez - Community Member

Presenting Members (List of members that would plan to be a part of presenting the work group's final recommendations at Council Work Session on April 20th, 2021)

Rodney Sáenz: rs@rodneynonline.net

Ms. Sue Gabriel: sue.e.gabriel@gmail.com

Background & Context

Over the last two decades, sworn officers of the Austin Police Department have killed 28 people of color and injured many others.

In many neighborhoods and communities across our city, a phone call for emergency help of any kind has become a dangerous risk. Black people, Indigenous people, Latinx people and other people of color in Austin face grim calculations when calling for help, along with immigrants, young people, sex workers, people with mental health crises and their families, people with developmental disabilities and their families, LGBTQ+ people, and survivors of sexual violence and intimate partner violence. Our city as a whole is less safe because many people in Austin cannot count on safe help when they need it.

For far too many Austinites, calling for help requires weighing whether making the call will ultimately do more harm than good. True public safety means investing in responses that don't put residents at risk. The Reimagining Public Safety process is an opportunity to create systems of care during emergency and crisis situations that provide help without requiring community members to risk their lives or their freedom.

The Reimagining 911 and Non-Police Crisis Response workgroup, made up of representatives from affected communities and concerned community members, presents recommendations centering on the following:

- 1. Diversion of majority of 911 calls away from police and towards appropriate first responders**
 - Increased capacity for mental health responders
 - Training for 911 dispatchers
- 2. Non-police crisis line and community response team**
- 3. Culturally and linguistically appropriate communication in emergency response options**
 - Culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach
 - Outreach on when and how to call for help
- 4. Ongoing community accountability and evaluation**

These recommendations are rooted in the values of the RPS Task Force. *Grounded in the historical context of policing* in the U.S. and in Austin, the Reimagining 911 and Non-Police Crisis Response Work Group (hereinafter the 911 Workgroup) acknowledges that *holistic community safety is distinct from policing and should be defined by directly impacted communities*. As such, our recommendations include *divesting from systems that cause harm*, developing or supporting existing crisis response networks that are truly *accessible to all community members*, and that arise from and *center those most directly harmed by existing systems*. Our recommendations also support *sustainability and long-term thinking* in suggesting full and permanent funding for equitable crisis response networks and planning for long-term *accountability to community*.

The 911 Workgroup acknowledges that the task of the uncompensated members of the work group has truly been larger than the timeframe permitted. Winter storm Uri and the ensuing infrastructure crisis further limited community input, in particular because many of the work group members were, and still are, responding to the continuing needs of community members dealing with long-term effects of the storm. Community members most disparately affected by police violence have been disparately affected by aftereffects of the storm as well, further complicating efforts to gain detailed and crucial community input. Accordingly, we would like to emphasize the need for ongoing input from various affected communities as the process moves forward. Stipends and translation support from the City will be necessary to garner the community input needed to shape implementation of these recommendations.

These recommendations also reflect the understanding of the work group that the decoupling of 911 from the Austin Police Department is currently underway. Although the work group is not apprised of the status of progress towards this goal, the work group strongly supports this decoupling.

Recommendations

A. Divert Majority of 911 Calls away from Police and towards Appropriate First Responders

1. Establish a fully funded mental health first response and remove any structural barriers that prevent community access to mental health first response independent from police.

Why: [APD leads in police shootings during mental health calls](#)

When people call 911 they should be (and are now) given the following options: EMS, Fire, Mental Health, Police. However, non-police mental health “first response” is currently only available in situations deemed appropriate for phone counseling. Currently, there are limitations on the types of calls that mental health first responders can respond to, specifically regarding calls that involve substance use, use of a weapon, harm to self or others, and calls that involve crime. We must enable mental health responders to actually respond to the types of calls that have previously ended in the death of the person experiencing a crisis, and ensure adequate funding to ensure that trained staff can respond 24/7.

A determination of the appropriateness of police intervention should be made by the community member requesting assistance in conjunction with the mental health first responder, not by the dispatcher. Policies regarding when mental health professionals can respond to 911 calls need to be reviewed and revised through a transparent community process and dispatchers should be trained accordingly. In addition, call takers need to be adequately trained on mental health issues, both broadly speaking to enhance their general knowledge and in the context of a 911 call, so they can better recognize, interact and route the call.

Mental health first response teams must be able to respond to mental health crises without police and use police backup as a last resort. Response teams would consist of a medic, & crisis worker

and peer/community health worker. The team must be equipped to respond during crisis moments including COVID-19 and severe weather. The team should be provided with appropriate equipment such as vehicles to ensure ability to service all areas of the city.

- 2. 911 operators and first responders should receive appropriate training with an emphasis on prioritizing the response to and need for mental health services over responding to nonviolent criminal behavior.**

Why: [APD leads in police shootings during mental health calls](#)

In order to ensure that when someone asks for the mental health option, they get a mental health clinician, training for 911 call operators must go beyond Mental Health First Aid. Although training can only go so far, in order to combat systemic racism and ensure to the best of our ability that call takers do not make fatal decisions based on racist ideas of danger, all call takers must undergo training on anti-racism, that includes examples of racism in a 911 call center, and regular anti-racism supervision. In addition, call takers need to be adequately trained on mental health issues, both broadly speaking to enhance their general knowledge and in the context of a 911 call, so they can better recognize, interact and route the call.

First responders need training to approach all situations with a mindset towards helping community members and addressing unmet needs rather than towards punishment. While police officers should not be responding to requests for mental health services, they should receive training directly from mental health professionals beyond the CIT training.

B. Fund Non-Police Crisis Line and Community Response Team

- 3. The City should fund a community-run non-police first response outside of the 911 system. This service should also include a community-led resource line and respond to situations that do not appear to require a mental health response (loud music, blocked driveways, etc). Police should not be the entity to respond to non-criminal, quality of life complaints, or to other situations that have been decriminalized in this community.**

Why: According to an Austin Justice Coalition report released in July 2020 regarding 911 calls, only 21% of 911 calls pertain to crime. Creating this community resource signifies a pathway to respond and address a host of other community needs without overreliance on police. Calls for service that are unrelated to crime are best served by a civilian community response.

Learning from cities across the country, such as Sacramento, CA, the City should fund a program similar to the [MH First program](#) led by community groups most impacted by police violence. MH First is an independent crisis response service, staffed by a team of volunteers trained to de-escalate confrontations and provide direct aid and resources to those experiencing potentially

life-threatening psychological issues and other instances of crisis. According to Cat Brooks, one of its founders, the Anti Police-Terror Project developed the program “because large swaths of the Black and brown community are reluctant to call 911, “no matter how great the emergency.” The purpose of the MH First program “ is to interrupt and eliminate the need for law enforcement in mental health crisis first response by providing mobile peer support, de-escalation assistance, and non-punitive and life-affirming interventions; therefore decriminalizing emotional and psychological crises and decreasing the stigma around mental health, substance use, and domestic violence, while also addressing their root causes: white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism.”

Currently this service exists in Austin through [10,000 Fearless First Responders](#) and we recommend that the city should fully resource this group and others like it to allow them to be self-sufficient, autonomous and able to be sustained. 10,000 Fearless First Responders also provides assistance with non-crisis and non-crime situations that should not be handled by police. Funds for the creation of this will come from the Reimagine Public Safety Fund. This initiative would be in addition to non-police mental health first response through 911 (Recommendation #1). We anticipate the budget would be about \$2 million annually.

C. Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Communication in Emergency Response Options

- 4. Ensure language access for residents with Limited English Proficiency in all emergency response call centers.**
 - a. Establish a standardized language access procedure used by all emergency response for callers with Limited English Proficiency (LEP).**
 - b. Provide culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach and education to ensure the community understands the process and know how to use the services.**
 - c. Call takers must undergo community based cultural competency training and regular refresher training for working with communities with Limited English Proficiency.**
 - d. Text messaging should be added as an option for accessing emergency response.**

Why: Asian immigrant communities in Travis county avoid using 911 for emergency response services because they do not speak English and are unfamiliar with the calling procedures. Reports of being hung up on after speaking in languages other than English and Spanish may have been because individuals with LEP didn't know that the operator was connecting to a translator. Austin Asian Community Health Initiative (AACHI) has requested a copy of the procedure from the department to provide community education to enable the Asian and Asian American communities with Limited English Proficiency to access emergency response services, but the request was denied.

5. **The City should undertake a multilingual public education campaign to raise awareness regarding appropriate emergency service use.**

Why: Overreliance on police to respond to crises has led to the murder of many Austin community members such as Mike Ramos and David Joseph. Austinites should be educated on the various emergency services available to them as well as how they work. Austinites should also be aware of the process for language interpretation when they call 911.

D. Ongoing Community Accountability and Evaluation

7. **The City of Austin should Conduct a regular and ongoing independent audit (annual, bi-annual, etc.) of emergency response calls and a linguistically and culturally accessible community survey requesting residents' opinion regarding the effectiveness of emergency response calls.**
 - a. **Language access is a key factor in providing equitable, accessible emergency and crisis response. For example, Asian American communities with LEP often report dissatisfaction with interpretation/translation services provided by community resources. Inaccurate or inadequate interpretation/translation may create life threatening misunderstandings. Regular feedback ensures quality language access.**
 - b. **Audits should also include the number of calls diverted away from police, incidents of police violence in non-crime crisis calls, and the number of calls to non-police crisis resources. The community-based evaluation should engage a broad range of Austin residents, with a focus on communities most affected by police violence and state intervention, in providing feedback on how first response programs are working for them. The evaluation should seek feedback on perceptions and experiences of emergency/crisis responses and should provide community participants with compensation for their time.**

Why: Ongoing evaluation of emergency response services is necessary to ensure that the reimagined systems align with the intention of making crisis response safer, more accessible, and more equitable. Community members who have been most directly affected by police violence are the most knowledgeable sources about whether reimagined systems are improving lived conditions in the city. The city must develop sustainable processes that will ensure ongoing community accountability over the long term.

8. **In order to engender community trust in the city's "Reimagining Public Safety" process- the city should:**
 - 1) **not return any of the "Reimagining" or "Decoupling" funds to APD.**
 - 2) **follow the RPS taskforce recommendation and not fund an APD cadet class, and**
 - 3) **invest the full amount of the "Reimagining" city funds towards holistic community safety recommendations of the taskforce working groups IN this year's budget.****Only with these displays of commitment by the city, do we recommend a second phase of Reimagining Public Safety that allows for transparent and thoughtful community input in**

creating a Reimagining Public Safety Plan that leads towards effective results for systemic change.

Why: *“The timeline for an authentic, thoughtful reorganization process is much longer than 6-8 months. The structural inequities that are foundational to American society are often replicated in policing practices. A divestment of resources from ineffective policing practices to community safety policies and actions that result in more safety for the greatest number of people is our ultimate aim. Bearing that in mind, we must be steadfast in valuing accountability, transparency, efficiency, and humanity.*

The process of reimagining public safety and re-envisioning how resources are used to provide for the public’s safety are long term projects. These processes should not be rushed to suit political aims or be held to election timelines. Rather, the timeline set for [Austin’s] process should be based on National best-practices and historical evidence of other [Austin]-based transition processes where personnel and budgets were re-programmed.” Quotes are sourced from [Oakland’s Reimagining Public Safety Taskforce Recommendations](#).

9. Recommendation: The City must “invest in and expand community leadership development to guide public safety initiatives.” [Source](#)

Why: *“The timeline for an authentic, thoughtful reorganization process is much longer than 6-8 months. The process of reimagining public safety and re-envisioning how resources are used to provide for the public’s safety are long term projects ([Source: Oakland’s Reimagining Public Safety Taskforce Recommendations](#)).”* Our current system of “public safety” is rooted in systemic oppression established over hundreds of years. Truly reimagining public safety change will require ongoing cultural/ideological shifting over time, so there should be ongoing input from and accountability to the community to ensure a true reimagination of public safety. In order to ensure that the communities most impacted by systems and ideologies of oppression are able to offer their expertise, the City must commit to investing in community leaders. This may include funding education and training, compensation for participation, childcare, transportation, interpretation/translation services, etc. The OPO currently has a [Community Police Review Commission](#) and [Public Safety Commission](#), but their eligibility, application, time commitment requirements, and selection process are inequitable.

10. The City should budget a role for the Equity Office in assessing plans for and implementation of non-police crisis response.

Why: It’s essential that non-police crisis response fully serves Black people, Latino people, other people of color and other other communities in Austin (people with mental health issues, undocumented people, and sex workers, for example) who have suffered disparate impact from crisis response that relies on armed officers. The Equity Office, with a focus on advancing equity in all aspects of City operations and experience in conducting equity assessments, is well

positioned to assess how equitably non-police crisis response will serve various populations in Austin.

Additional Data and Supporting Material (Optional as Needed)

[Safety Beyond Policing: Promoting Care over Criminalization](#)

[Los Angeles Alternative Response Flowchart](#)

[Edmonton 24/7 Crisis Intervention Report Video](#)