

EMERGENCY RESPONSE TODAY

HISTORY

America's national emergency response system was established in 1968, with the designation of 911 as the universal emergency telephone number. Originally designed for reporting fires, 911 quickly became the go-to number for all emergencies: fire, medical, and police. [1] Increasingly, the public relies on 911 for immediate assistance in non-life-threatening situations.

DRAWBACKS OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM

Many experts suggest that calls for non-life-threatening situations can be addressed more effectively and at a reduced cost by community-based health and social service responders. They warn that involving police in nonemergency situations can lead to unnecessary criminal justice involvement and avoidable injuries and even fatalities.

CALLS FOR CHANGE

Leaders in America's largest cities see the need for change in the emergency response system. The Los Angeles Police Department's largest employee union, for example, has identified more than two dozen types of 911 calls that could be routed to other city agencies. According to the union president, "Police officers are sent to too many calls that are better suited for unarmed service providers." [2] Similarly, New York City Mayor Eric Adams wants to expand a program that sends mental health professionals rather than police officers to respond to mental health-related 911 calls. [3]

BY THE NUMBERS

40,000,000

40 million Californians make more than 25 million 911 calls annually. [4]

840,000

In Sacramento alone, 90 trained dispatchers field 840,000 calls per year from the city's 500,000 residents. [5]

<2%

Fewer than 2% of 911 calls to police are for serious violent crimes, and just 4% of calls to fire departments are fire related. [6]

1/4

A quarter of police-involved shooting deaths are linked to mental illness, half of which occur in the person's own home. [7]

15%

As many as 15% of calls to 911 emergency services are for behavioral health emergencies. [8]

References

1. The 911 Call Processing System: A Review of the Literature as it Relates to Policing. Vera Institute of Justice, July 2019.
2. Los Angeles Times, March 1, 2023.
3. New York Times, March 2, 2023
4. Vera Institute of Justice, op cit.
5. Audit of the 911 Emergency Communications Center, City of Sacramento, Office of the City Auditor, Performance Audit Division, Report # 2019/20-05, September 2019.
6. How Do the Police Actually Spend Their Time? New York Times, June 19, 2020. Cannuscio CC, Davis AL, et al. A Strained 9-1-1 System and Threats to Public Health. J Community Health (2016) 41:658-666.
7. Saleh AZ, Appelbaum PS, Liu X, et al: Deaths of people with mental illness during interactions with law. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29853001/>
8. Balfour, M. E., Hahn Stephenson, A., Delany-Brumsey, A., Winsky, J., & Goldman, M. L. (2022). Cops, clinicians, or both? Collaborative approaches to responding to behavioral health emergencies. Psychiatric Services, 73(6), 658-669. <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ps.202000721>

911 OLD SYSTEM,
BROKEN RESPONSE

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE MODELS

Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) – Eugene and Springfield, Oregon.

Established in 1898, CAHOOTS uses mobile crisis teams to provide an alternative to police response. CAHOOTS is a confidential, voluntary, and free service that responds to issues like homelessness, intoxication, disorientation, substance abuse, mental illness, dispute resolution, fire aid, and crisis counseling. More than 60% of the calls they respond to involve unhoused people; 30% involve people with mental illness. In 2019, the team responded to over 24,000 calls, or about 20% of all of Eugene and Springfield's 911 calls. Only 150 – fewer than 1% – of the calls ended up requiring police assistance. The budgets of the Eugene and Springfield police departments are approximately \$90 million a year, while CAHOOTS costs about \$2 million annually. Based on the number of calls they have diverted, they save taxpayers an estimated \$8 million on public safety, and \$14 million on hospital costs annually.

Denver Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) – Denver, Colorado.

Denver STAR uses a mobile crisis team model operating within the City and County. STAR is managed by the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment in partnership with the Denver Department of Safety. Over an 11 month period, Denver STAR has responded to 1,323 calls. No one was injured or arrested, and police backup was never requested. From January – July 2022, Denver Department of Safety identified 5,891 calls that could have been handled by a fully expanded STAR Program, showing the opportunity for further expansion.

Albuquerque Community Safety Department (CSD) – Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Established in 2020, Albuquerque CSD is the first stand-alone department of its kind in the country. As a cabinet-level department within the city, it is a third branch of public safety, on equal footing with the police and fire departments. ACS addresses calls involving mental health, homelessness, substance use, and other issues that do not require a paramedic or police officer. Calls are triaged by 911 and 311 operators. To date, Albuquerque CSD has responded to more than 20,000 calls, less than 1% of which have required eventual police involvement.