

Arguing for a co-responder model and an alternative dispatch system in Allentown

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [George Floyd killing](#) April 13, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

“What is often needed is a mental health professional or social worker, not two armed police officers, however well meaning.”

Congresswoman Susan Wild kicked off the Hispanic Center’s Community Conversation on “Trust Building with Law Enforcement” yesterday **with a brief talk** that highlighted reforms undertaken by the Allentown Police Department, most of which we have noted with interest (and envy) in these pages, and in which she remarked that many police departments want “to expand the number of mental health professionals working with them to respond to calls, and I will tell you that this has become a very big priority for me in Congress.” Are we one of those departments, one that might benefit from her work to secure funding for crisis response services such as described below? Or are we at least going to have the discussion? What are we waiting for?

selections from [*Julie Thomases, “Why mental health providers or social workers should help with many 911 calls.” Morning Call, April 11, 2021.*](#)

According to Allentown Police Chief Glenn Granitz, in 2019, city police received over 100,000 calls for service. Of those, up to 10% were related to mental health.

The number 911 is the most frequently called number in response to an emergency. Allentown’s 911 response system sends police to all 911 emergency calls, whether the calls involve violence or criminal activity or nonviolent, noncriminal issues such as mental health, homelessness, intoxication or substance abuse.

As a result, too often our police are in a position where they must deal with these issues for which they may not have professional mental/behavioral health or social work training.

In Lehigh County, 5,250 people were committed to jail, according to the Lehigh County Criminal Justice Advisory Board Data Committee Report Year End 2019. Of those people, 1,245 required a mental health evaluation and 1,154 underwent medically supervised detoxification.

Incarceration not only fails to correct these problems but instead often exacerbates them. We can reduce the number of mentally ill people going into prison, admitted to the emergency room against their will, and the trauma experienced by those in a behavioral health crisis by modifying our 911 dispatch system.

I've researched many alternative 911 programs that work in collaboration with local police, community service organizations or mental health services, through my work with local organizations involved with criminal justice reform.

What they all have in common is they try to respond to nonviolent, noncriminal emergency calls in a way that will reduce or even eliminate death, injury, trauma, or incarceration and provide follow-up case management to reduce repeat calls from the same person.

An increasing number of programs avoid sending police whenever possible. Many are started as pilot programs. Some are referred to as "co-responder" models, in which a crisis intervention team includes a police officer and an EMT or mental health worker who go to the scene.

Once the situation is made safe, officers can move to other incidents requiring their attention while a mental health professional or social worker stays behind with the individual. Some cities have a combination of both a co-responder model as well as an unarmed dispatch of a trained mental health professional, social worker or EMT.

I recently participated in a virtual stakeholders meeting, hosted by The Lehigh Valley Justice Institute, to introduce nearly three dozen Allentown and Lehigh county officials, policy makers, possible funders and those involved with the logistics of our 911 system to two alternative

emergency response programs: **CAHOOTS** (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) of Eugene, Oregon and the newly formed Bensalem/Bucks County's co-responder model.

While a stated duty of our police is to remain alert to the emergency needs of our citizens, what is often needed is a mental health professional or social worker, not two armed police officers, however well meaning. Programs such as CAHOOTS and co-responder programs free up police to deal with crime and crime prevention.

The \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, popularly known as the COVID-19 Stimulus Package, reportedly will allocate \$72 million to Lehigh County and \$57 million to Allentown this year. Our county and city officials need to make sure a portion of these funds pay for hiring, salary and benefits for mental health provider first responder units.

In addition, input from the community needs to be part of the choice of an alternative 911 response program.

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