

In Denver, freeing up law enforcement to address crime issues

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing February 28, 2021

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

Ok, what are some sensible re-imaginings of the way public safety is done in certain situations and circumstances that are being piloted, explored, tested around the country?

Gadfly profiled several of these programs in these pages last summer.

But he finds this example from Denver in his current clippings file.

Note that the purpose of the re-imagining is to better serve the public and to enhance “real” police work.

selections from David Sachs, “In the first six months of health care professionals replacing police officers, no one they encountered was arrested.” Denverite, February 2, 2021.

A young program that puts troubled nonviolent people in the hands of health care workers instead of police officers has proven successful in its first six months, according to a progress report.

Since June 1, 2020, a mental health clinician and a paramedic have traveled around the city in a white van handling low-level incidents, like trespassing and mental health episodes, that would have otherwise fallen to patrol officers with badges and guns. In its first six months, the Support Team Assisted Response program, or STAR, has responded to 748 incidents. None required police or led to arrests or jail time.

The civilian team handled close to six incidents a day from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, in high-demand neighborhoods. STAR does not yet have enough people or vans to respond to every nonviolent incident, but about 3 percent of calls for DPD service, or over 2,500

incidents, were worthy of the alternative approach, according to the report.

STAR represents a more empathetic approach to policing that keeps people out of an often-cyclical criminal justice system by connecting people with services like shelter, food aid, counseling, and medication. The program also deliberately cuts down on encounters between uniformed officers and civilians.

The policing alternative empowers behavioral health experts to call the shots, even when police officers are around.

Sailon said she remembers a call last year in which a woman was experiencing mental health symptoms at a 7-Eleven. The clerk had called the police — the woman was technically trespassing — but when the police arrived, they called Sailon.

“We got there and told police they could leave,” Sailon said. “We didn’t need them there.”

The woman, who was unhoused, was upset about some issues she was having on her prepaid Social Security card. Sailon helped her into the van where the two “game-planned” a solution before the STAR crew drove her to a day shelter for some food, she said.

“So we were sort of able to solve those problems in the moment for her and got the police back in service, dealing with a law enforcement call,” Sailon said.

The fact that the police officers even called the STAR team tells Dr. Matthew Lunn, who is in charge of DPD’s strategic initiatives, that the program is working (Lunn has a PhD but is not a medical doctor). About 35 percent of calls to STAR personnel come from police officers, according to the report.

Chief Pazen is thrilled with the success of STAR, but the time and money it saves will go toward fighting crime, he said.

A spectrum of solutions has sprouted from protests against systemic racism and police brutality that started last summer, including the idea

of taking money from traditional policing and giving it to social programs not unlike STAR.

For Pazen, transferring low-level calls to civilian teams is not about reallocating money. It's about solving two problems at once: getting harmless residents the help they need while letting police focus on other things.

“I want the police department to focus on police issues,” Pazen said. “We have more than enough work with regards to violent crime, property crime and traffic safety, and if something like STAR or any other support system can lighten the load on mental health calls for service, substance abuse calls for service, and low-level issues, that frees up law enforcement to address crime issues.”

Pazen added: “I see this as an ‘and.’ Not an ‘or.’”