

BUFFALO IN TRANSITION SERIES

COMMUNITY SAFETY DEPARTMENTS ARE THE

FUTURE OF FIRST RESPONSE



MAY 2025



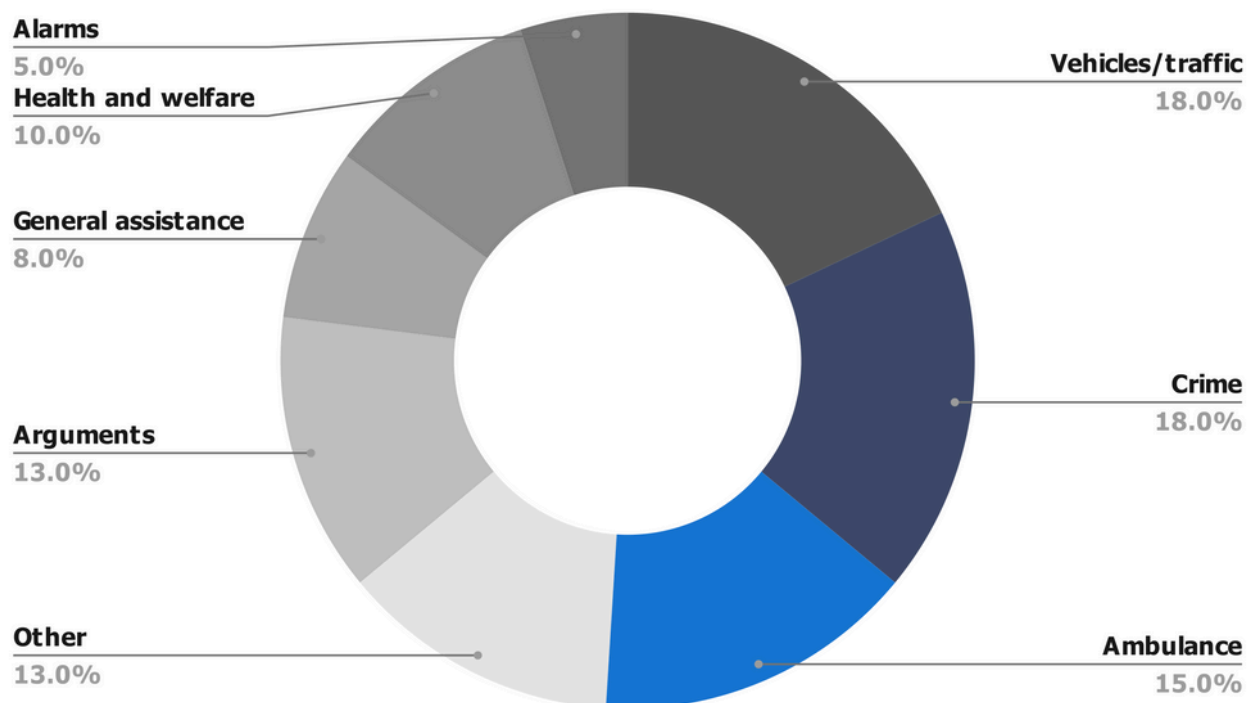
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KEY FACTS

In Buffalo, over 80% of 911 calls sent to police are not about crime. Each year, tens of thousands of calls related to welfare checks, homelessness, minor disputes, drug use, and other social disturbances or quality-of-life issues are dispatched to police, who lack the training, skills, and time to meet the underlying health and social needs that generated the call. Using police as the default responder to every community need contributes to skyrocketing police overtime, especially in an era where new police recruits are scarce. Police should be reserved for responding to crime, and alternative responders should be utilized for all nonviolent, noncriminal concerns. Sending police to every community need is dangerous, inefficient, and costly, and cities have successfully begun an alternative approach: Community Safety Departments (CSDs).

Most calls do not need a police response.

911 calls to BPD by category (2020-2022)



On the cover: The Policing Alternatives Division (PAD) in Atlanta, Georgia provides a range of programming and services including dispatching harm reduction specialists as first responders through the City's 311 call line for non-emergency needs. Source: PAD website.

A PATH FORWARD

Community Safety Departments take a holistic approach to community safety; they are freestanding departments that are not subsets of police, fire or EMS. They address non-emergency 311, 988, or 911 calls with a specialized response that preserves police, fire, and EMS resources for true emergencies. As a City-level department, they are a permanent fixture of the first response landscape and have access to funding, insurance, liability protection, and legal authority that comes with being a municipal service. Rather than ad-hoc, piecemeal programs tacked on to other departments or contracted with non-profits, CSDs can house multiple services under one umbrella. CSDs operate programs related to behavioral health, violence prevention, and quality-of-life concerns, which typically mean some version of community responder teams, violence interrupters, mediators, and/or civilian community service officers. All of these responders are unarmed, civilian responders who provide proactive, preventative services and can be dispatched to calls without police.



Types of responders can include:

- * **Community Responders:** 2-3 member teams who are trained in mental health and substance use intervention, often including a peer, EMT, and mental health clinician.
- * **Violence Interrupters:** Credible messengers who have relevant life experience build relationships with community members at risk of gun violence to prevent shootings, intervene when tensions are rising, and prevent retaliatory violence after a shooting occurs by providing follow-up care to victims and their families.
- * **Mediators:** Dayton, Ohio, operates a Mediation Response Unit that responds exclusively to nonviolent arguments and conflicts to provide immediate de-escalation and on-scene mediation.
- * **Civilian Community Officers:** Many calls to police are for things like illegal parking, fireworks, excessive noise, abandoned vehicles, and similar. Civilian community officers can respond to these calls and problem-solve, take reports, or issue citations if necessary. They are not sworn police officers, they don't carry guns, and they don't make arrests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Buffalo should establish a Community Safety Department.

In the short term, this office could coordinate and support existing community-based efforts such as the emerging community responder pilot program and the Street Engagement Team operated by Back to Basics by identifying and distributing funding, building political and public support, and assisting with these programs' expansion and success.

In the long term, a City of Buffalo Community Safety Department could operate its own teams or contract with community-operated teams to ensure that the services listed above are provided 24 hours a day in every neighborhood of Buffalo. A CSD would be especially helpful in ensuring cooperation between police, fire, EMS, and 911 call centers to ensure the right response to every call. Community safety must go beyond policing to provide a wide range of responses to the diverse needs experienced by Buffalo residents.

Community Safety Departments are the future of first response, and developing a CSD in Buffalo should be a top priority.



Members of the H.E.A.R.T. team in Durham, NC, meet with a community member in June 2024. Photo by Angela Hollowell for Tradeoffs.

READ MORE & REACH OUT

KEY SOURCES

- “Bringing Community Responders to Erie County,” Colleen Kristich, PPG
- See websites for Albuquerque Community Safety in Albuquerque, NM, and Durham Community Safety in Durham, NC

KEY PARTNERS

- Back to Basics Ministries
- Buffalo Center for Health Equity
- Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition
- Evergreen Health
- Little People’s Victory
- VOICE Buffalo

BUFFALO IN TRANSITION SERIES

This collection of briefs share clear, community-driven policy ideas for Buffalo’s next chapter. Each brief highlights practical ways to reduce poverty, advance racial equity, and build a more just city. The ideas come from PPG’s Community Agenda, created each year by over 380 local partners.

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