Buffalo Commons Student Perspectives

Revisiting Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) in Buffalo

By a University at Buffalo Law Student

November 9, 2026

About the Series
The Buffalo Commons Student Perspectives Series gives students an opportunity to share original research and analysis on issues of importance to Partnership for the Public Good and its partners. This paper was prepared in Fall 2026 for the **Lawyers as Change Agents course at the University at Buffalo School of Law**. Thank you to Professor Sam Magavern for facilitating this student research.

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Executive Summary

Buffalo should establish a Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) pilot that connects people facing eligible low-level offenses with housing, treatment, and other services instead of relying on arrest. LEAD recognizes that some repeated police encounters stem from unmet health and social needs that criminal prosecution alone cannot resolve.

The City began exploring LEAD in 2017 and committed to a pilot in B District in 2021, but the program was never launched. Research from other cities provides evidence of LEAD's potential benefits, as well as potential challenges to effective implementation. In an evaluation of Seattle's LEAD program, participants had 60% lower odds of arrest during the first six months than people processed through the usual criminal justice system. A San Francisco evaluation also found fewer arrests and felony cases among participants. However, results from other communities have been mixed, particularly for incarceration, housing, and health outcomes. Current research on some LEAD programs also identifies uneven access to diversion and barriers caused by complicated referral procedures and insufficient services.

Buffalo should launch a funded pilot that coordinates with its existing Behavioral Health Team, connects eligible individuals directly with case managers, and accepts both police and community referrals. Officers and community partners should follow clear diversion procedures and receive ongoing training. An independent evaluation should assess racial disparities in program access, changes in participant outcomes, and the full costs of program operation.

LEAD in Buffalo: Background and Local Need

AN ALTERNATIVE TO REPEATED ARRESTS

Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) gives police an alternative to arrest for low-level offenses linked to substance use, mental health needs, homelessness, and poverty. It connects people with long-term case management and assistance with obtaining housing, treatment, and other services. Participation is voluntary, and the program follows a harm-reduction approach: people can receive help without first agreeing to stop using drugs. Referrals can begin at a potential arrest, through other police contacts, or through community partners.[1]

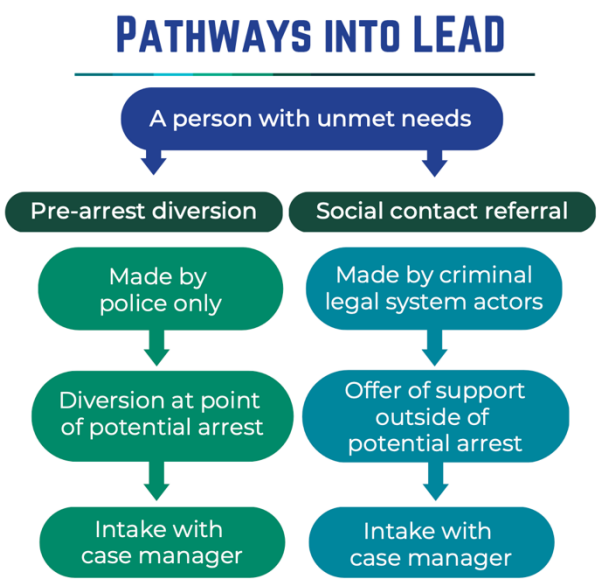


Figure 1. Pathways into Albany LEAD's program through pre-arrest diversion and social contact referrals. Source: Albany LEAD, *2022 Annual Report* (2023), 5.

LEAD rests on the premise that some behaviors treated as criminal justice problems stem from unmet health and social needs. When low-level offenses are connected to homelessness, substance use, or mental-health challenges, arrest may address an immediate incident without resolving the conditions that contribute to repeated encounters with police. LEAD seeks to address those underlying conditions through sustained case management and community-based services.

LEAD IN PRACTICE:
A PARTICIPANT'S EXPERIENCE IN ALBANY

Albany LEAD reported the experience of an individual who was homeless and facing arrest for drug possession when referred to the program. The participant initially sought temporary shelter and financial assistance. With help from LEAD case managers, the individual later secured permanent housing and disability benefits, completed inpatient and outpatient substance-use treatment, and found employment.[2]

Program evaluations from other communities show that LEAD has the potential to reduce arrests and connect people with services that address serious, underlying issues that require long-term solutions. These evaluations also offer insights that can help Buffalo build an effective program and measure its results.

REVISITING EARLIER IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

In 2017, a LEAD working group formed in Buffalo under the coordination of Partnership for the Public Good, bringing together community organizations, health agencies, prosecutors, and city representatives.[3] In 2021, the City committed to a pilot LEAD program in B District.[4]





Figure 2. Members of Albany LEAD's Operational Work Group, including staff from St. Catherine's Center for Children, the Albany County Department of Social Services, and Catholic Charities. Source: Albany LEAD, *2022 Annual Report* (2023), 3, photographs by El-Wise Noisette.

Unfortunately, implementation of the program stalled. As reported by *The Buffalo News* in May 2023, PPG Executive Director Andrea Ó Súilleabháin explained, "The only thing we're missing is action from City Hall or the Police Department to do the work of getting a pilot up and running."[5] Under the new leadership of Mayor Sean Ryan and Police Commissioner Erika Shields, the City of Buffalo can revisit that commitment.[6]

A renewed effort should define the responsibilities of the Mayor's Office, the Buffalo Police Department, the Erie County District Attorney's Office, and participating community service providers in operating the program. It should also secure funding for LEAD case managers and establish a launch date for police officers and community partners to begin referring eligible individuals for help with housing, treatment, and other services.

Buffalo Police Activity in 2024

7,759	~7,000
Police Arrests Fiscal Year 2024–25	Behavioral-Health Crisis Dispatches Calendar Year 2024

Note: These figures represent different types of police activity, not necessarily encounters eligible for LEAD.

LEAD would complement Buffalo's existing behavioral-health services while providing an alternative to arrest. The Buffalo Police Department's Behavioral Health Team (BHT) currently provides crisis intervention, case management, resource navigation, and follow-up services. LEAD would create an additional pathway for diverting people facing eligible low-level offenses into long-term, community-based support, while coordinating services with BHT.[7] Such an alternative is worth pursuing in a city where police made 7,759 arrests in fiscal year 2024–25[8] and responded to nearly 7,000 dispatches related to a behavioral-health crisis in 2024.[9]

LEAD Programs: Expansion, Evaluation Findings, and Implementation

LEAD'S EXPANSION: PROGRAMS LAUNCHED SINCE 2021

Recent programs show how cities have organized and expanded services. The referral and enrollment figures in Table 1 measure how many people LEAD has reached. Western New York has also engaged with LEAD, although its results remain largely undocumented. The Niagara Falls Police Department reported joining LEAD in July 2020, but its 2021 police-reform plan provides no evaluation of subsequent outcomes.[10]

Renewed efforts in Buffalo could benefit from the funding and coordination models developed in other states. In 2022, New Jersey received $6 million in federal funding for six pilot sites.[11] Similarly, in March 2026, North Carolina announced a $1.5 million expansion of LEAD to support seven law-enforcement agencies in the state.[12]



Figure 3. North Carolina's Fayetteville Police Chief Roberto Bryan Jr. discusses LEAD at a statewide program expansion event on March 24, 2026. Source: Rachel Crumpler, "NC Expands Diversion Programs for Some Low-Level Offenses as Alternative to Jail," *North Carolina Health News*, April 28, 2026. Photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition.

Table 1. Selected LEAD Launches and Expansions Since 2021

Location	Program Start or Expansion	Documented Development
Ithaca, NY	Began operating in 2021	Local reporting documented 20 diversions by the program's formal launch in March 2022.[13]
Minneapolis, MN	Launched in 2022	Pillsbury United Communities reported 171 referrals, 59 enrolled clients, and 763 client contacts as of August 2025.[14]
Poughkeepsie, NY	Launched in 2023	Dutchess County reported 21 referrals and 10 participants during the program's first six weeks.[15]
Cohoes, NY & Watervliet, NY	Expanded in 2023	Albany LEAD reported 31 new referrals and 79 people receiving services across the two cities in 2025.[16]
Pittsburgh, PA	Launched in 2024	Local reporting documented that 15 people were assigned case managers during a three-week preliminary launch.[17]

LEAD in Seattle, WA

PROGRAM IMPACTS ON ARRESTS AND CRIMINAL CHARGES

Seattle's LEAD program has produced some of the strongest evidence of reduced involvement in the criminal justice system. In 2017, researchers compared 203 LEAD participants with 115 people who were arrested and processed through the criminal justice system as usual. The researchers accounted for measurable differences between the two groups. However, because participants were not randomly assigned to either group, other differences may have influenced the results.[18]

Seattle's evaluation found that LEAD participants had 60% and 58% lower odds of being arrested at least once than people processed through the usual criminal justice system, both during the first six months and over the longer follow-up period, respectively. They also had 39% lower odds of facing a felony charge during the longer follow-up period. All three differences were statistically significant, meaning they were unlikely to be explained by chance alone under the researchers' statistical analysis.[19]

Table 2. Seattle LEAD Participants' Arrest and Felony Charge Outcomes Compared with Usual Criminal Justice Processing

Outcome Measured	**Findings for LEAD Participants Compared with the Usual Process**
At least one arrest during the first six months after entering the study	60% lower odds of being arrested
At least one arrest over the longer follow-up period	58% lower odds of being arrested
At least one felony charge over the longer follow-up period	39% lower odds of facing a felony charge

Note: The longer-term analysis examined records from October 2009 through July 2014, including two years before LEAD launched in October 2011.

Further, arrest and charging decisions depend on police and prosecutorial practices. To examine this distinction, researchers conducted an additional analysis that excluded arrests related to outstanding warrants, which may involve earlier offenses rather than new criminal activity. Without warrant-related arrests, the difference between the groups was no longer statistically significant during the first six months. The longer-term results suggested a possible reduction but also fell short of being statistically significant. Therefore, the evaluation could not determine how much of the reduction reflected changes in underlying criminal behavior.[20]

PROGRAM COSTS AND SAVINGS

A 2019 evaluation of the same LEAD pilot program in Seattle found that LEAD participation was associated with approximately 1.4 fewer jail bookings and 41 fewer jail days per person annually, compared with those who underwent the usual criminal justice process. LEAD participants also had 88% lower odds of imprisonment. Estimated annual criminal justice costs per participant fell from $6,863 to $4,763 among LEAD participants, while rising from $5,734 to $11,695 in the comparison group.[21]

These findings suggest that LEAD can reduce costs associated with arrests, prosecution, and incarceration. However, the study did not include the costs of program operation. Therefore, the reported reductions do not establish how much money a city would save after paying for case management and services.[22] If implemented, Buffalo should measure the cost of providing LEAD services and any reductions in criminal justice spending to evaluate overall financial impact.

LEAD in San Francisco, CA

PROGRAM IMPACTS ON ARRESTS AND CRIMINAL CHARGES

A 2022 evaluation of San Francisco's LEAD program also found reductions in criminal justice involvement. Researchers compared LEAD participants with a group of people who had similar measured characteristics. During the twelve months following referral, LEAD participants had significantly fewer felony arrests, misdemeanor arrests, and felony cases than the comparison group.[23]

Table 3. Criminal Justice Outcomes Among
San Francisco LEAD Participants and a Comparison Group

Average Number of Events per Person	LEAD Participants	Comparison Group
Felony arrests	0.14	0.39
Misdemeanor arrests	0.08	0.46
Felony cases	0.08	0.29

Note: These figures represent average events per person during the twelve months following referral, based on 98 people in each group.

Program evaluation results show that LEAD participants experienced fewer felony arrests, misdemeanor arrests, and felony court cases than the comparison group during the first twelve months after referral. According to Table 3, for every 100 people in each group, researchers found an average of approximately 14 felony arrests among LEAD participants, compared with 39 felony arrests among people in the comparison group. Likewise, there were approximately 8 misdemeanor arrests for every 100 LEAD participants, compared with 46 misdemeanor arrests for every 100 people in the comparison group; and approximately 8 felony court cases for every 100 LEAD participants, compared with 29 felony court cases for every 100 people in the comparison group.[24]

However, the evaluation found no statistically significant differences in citations or misdemeanor court cases during the same period. When researchers extended the analysis to eighteen months, the findings could not establish that LEAD participants continued to experience fewer arrests or court cases than people in the comparison group after eighteen months. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that the benefits observed during the first year had diminished. Rather, the eighteen-month analysis included only 40 matched pairs between LEAD participants and people with similar characteristics from the comparison group, while there were 98 pairs in the twelve-month analysis. Thus, the smaller sample in the eighteen-month study made it more difficult to determine whether the differences observed during the first year continued over time.[25]

LEAD in North Carolina and New Mexico

PROGRAM IMPACTS ON ARRESTS AND INCARCERATION

Evaluations of LEAD programs in North Carolina and New Mexico have produced mixed findings. A 2025 study of four North Carolina programs found that LEAD participation was associated with fewer citations and arrests, but not with a statistically significant reduction in incarceration risk.[26] This distinction suggests that reducing arrests does not necessarily produce comparable reductions in detention or imprisonment.

A 2023 evaluation in Bernalillo County, New Mexico, compared 68 LEAD participants with 68 individuals who had been referred to the program but did not enroll. Researchers found no statistically significant relationship between LEAD enrollment and the number of new criminal cases during the following year. However, the relatively small sample and limited follow-up period prevented researchers from drawing firm conclusions about the program's effects.[27]

An earlier evaluation in Santa Fe, New Mexico, also reported mixed results. LEAD participants averaged 1.31 arrests during the six months before referral, compared with 0.93 arrests during the six months afterward. Although participants spent fewer days in detention, the time until their first rearrest did not differ significantly from the comparison group.[28]

> **THE IMPORTANCE OF MEASURING SEVERAL OUTCOMES OVER TIME**
>
> LEAD may reduce arrests without producing comparable reductions in incarceration. If Buffalo adopts LEAD, it should evaluate each outcome separately to determine where the program produces meaningful improvements.

Diversion Programs and Evidence of Potential Benefits

Larger studies of diversion programs in general provide evidence of potential benefits of LEAD and similar programs. A 2023 systematic review examined 47 studies of police-initiated diversion. Overall, diversion was associated with lower costs and reduced repeat encounters with the criminal justice system. However, evidence of improved behavioral-health outcomes was less conclusive. The review examined several diversion models, including LEAD.[29]

A 2025 report by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy reviewed six studies of diversion programs, four of which evaluated LEAD. Its combined analysis found statistically significant reductions in repeat encounters with the criminal justice system. This finding

remained statistically significant even after researchers excluded studies with a serious risk of bias. However, the available evidence did not support similar conclusions about improvements in participant outcomes in housing or employment.[30]

The Washington report also estimated that diversion programs could generate benefits exceeding their costs, including reduced encounters with the criminal justice system and avoided harms associated with crime. It should be noted that the study's estimates did not include all treatment and support expenses, so total government savings cannot be assessed based on these findings.[31]

Outcomes Beyond Criminal Justice: Housing and Behavioral Health

LEAD also seeks to improve participants' housing stability, health, and access to services. A Seattle study followed 176 LEAD participants and reported improvements in housing and income-related outcomes. Approximately 18% had permanent housing at the beginning of the study, compared with a monthly average of 28% during the following eighteen months. However, because the study did not include a comparison group, researchers could not determine whether LEAD itself caused these improvements.[32]

Another important program outcome is access to behavioral health services. A 2023 Duke University evaluation of four North Carolina LEAD programs found that participants used these services more frequently after enrollment, as shown in Table 4.[33]

Table 4. Use of Behavioral Health Services Among North Carolina LEAD Participants

Recorded Service	**Year Before LEAD Enrollment**	**Year After LEAD Enrollment**
Any behavioral health service	34% of 110 participants	71% of 104 participants
Medication treatment for opioid use disorder	3% of 110 participants	12% of 104 participants

The study's findings, as illustrated in Table 4, suggest that LEAD can help participants access behavioral health services. That said, the evaluation found mixed results across other treatment measures. Moreover, increased use of services does not necessarily establish improvements in mental health or reductions in substance-related harm.[34]

For Buffalo, these findings highlight the importance of tracking both access to services and participants' subsequent outcomes. Evaluation measures should include the number of participants who receive treatment after referral, housing stability, and health outcomes, rather than relying solely on the number of individuals enrolled in LEAD.

Lessons from Other Communities

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Effective implementation depends partly on whether police officers consistently refer eligible individuals to LEAD. In New Haven, Connecticut, police completed only two arrest diversions and fifteen referrals through other police contacts during the program's first nine months. Researchers identified various barriers, including complicated referral procedures, stigma toward people with substance use disorders, and some officers' preference for punitive responses.[35]

Albany experienced similar challenges. Researchers found that officers' attitudes toward LEAD influenced whether they chose to divert eligible individuals.[36] These findings suggest that Buffalo should establish simple referral procedures, provide continuing training, and secure support from police leadership and patrol officers.

Direct connections between referring partners and case managers can also improve enrollment. In Bernalillo County, 61% of individuals referred through a direct connection with a case manager enrolled, compared with 32% of those referred without one. Missing the enrollment deadline accounted for 71% of non-enrollments. The county also temporarily suspended community referrals in 2023 because of staffing and capacity concerns.[37]

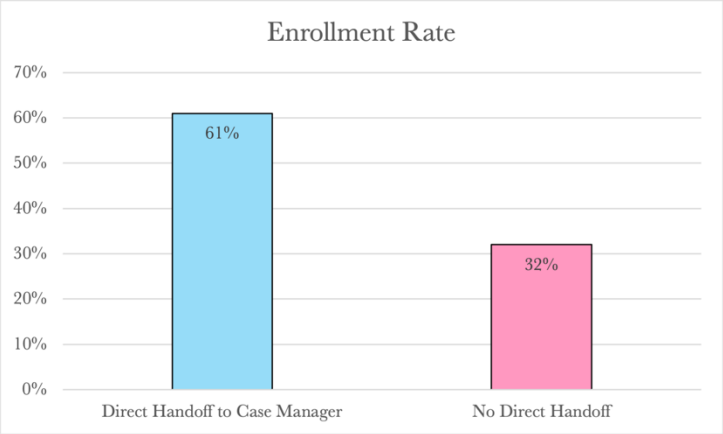


Figure 4. LEAD Enrollment Rates by Referral Method, Bernalillo County

Therefore, Buffalo should establish procedures that connect prospective participants directly with case managers whenever possible. The program must also maintain enough staff to respond promptly to referrals and provide continuing support.

Access to community services is another important factor. A 2025 study interviewed 27 program partners and 22 participants across four North Carolina LEAD sites. Respondents identified shortages of housing, treatment, and other services as barriers to continued participation. Some participants left the program when needed services were unavailable or difficult to access.[38]

These findings suggest that Buffalo should assess the availability of housing, treatment, and transportation services before launching LEAD. Referrals alone will have limited value if case managers cannot connect participants with the services they need.

FAIR ACCESS TO SERVICES: RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN DIVERSION AND REFERRALS

Evaluations have also identified racial disparities in access to LEAD services. Albany's 2022 annual report recorded 136 arrests involving LEAD-eligible charges and 26 diversions, producing an overall diversion rate of 16% across eligible arrests and diversions. However, diversion rates differed substantially by race.[39]

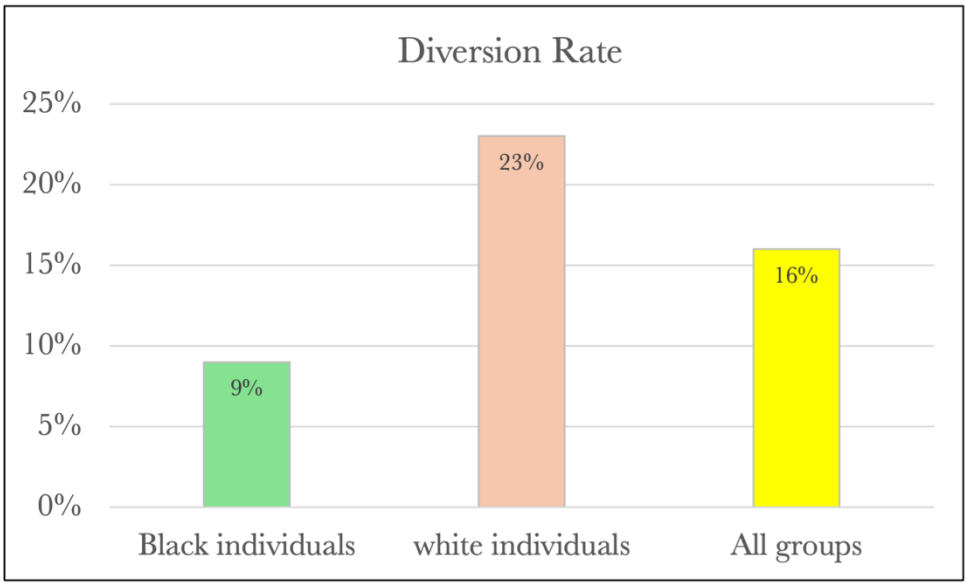


Figure 5. Albany LEAD Diversion Rates by Race, 2022

These disparities raise concerns about unequal access to diversion, but Albany's reported statistics do not clearly explain why these disparities occurred. For instance, some individuals facing eligible charges may have been excluded under other program rules. Thus, Albany's findings demonstrate the importance of recording who qualifies for diversion, who receives an offer, and why some individuals are excluded.[40]

Researchers have also identified similar disparities in North Carolina. Black individuals accounted for 44% of arrests involving LEAD-eligible drug charges but only 14% of referrals and enrollments. Researchers lacked some information needed to determine whether everyone arrested on an eligible charge met the program's full eligibility requirements.[41]

Buffalo should draw on these findings by allowing both police and community referrals while tracking eligibility, diversion offers, referrals, and enrollment by race. These measures would help identify unequal access and determine whether changes to program rules, officer training, or referral procedures are needed.

Recommendations for Buffalo: Establishing and Evaluating a LEAD Pilot

Buffalo should renew its earlier commitment to LEAD by establishing a funded pilot with clear responsibilities delineated between the Mayor's Office, Buffalo Police Department, Erie County District Attorney's Office, and participating service providers.



Figure 6. Members of Albany LEAD's Operational Work Group, including an Albany Police Department officer, a project manager, an assistant district attorney, and a staff member of the Center for Law and Justice. Source: Albany LEAD, *2022 Annual Report* (2023), 5.

The pilot should coordinate with Buffalo's existing Behavioral Health Team while providing a distinct alternative to arrest. Officers and community partners should receive training on eligibility and referral procedures. Referrals should include direct connections with case managers whenever possible, and participation should remain voluntary and consistent with LEAD's harm-reduction approach.

Buffalo should also establish an independent evaluation process before enrolling participants. An independent evaluator should collect baseline data and identify an appropriate comparison group before the pilot begins. Regular public reporting should document referrals, enrollment, and participant outcomes. Evaluations should also account for individuals who leave the program and examine whether improvements continue over time.

Table 5. Recommended Measures for Evaluating a Buffalo LEAD Pilot

Evaluation Area	**Proposed Measures for Program Evaluation**
Access and fairness	Eligible encounters, diversion offers, referrals, exclusions, and enrollment (all organized by race and referral pathway)
Service delivery	Time to first contact, number of participants who receive services after referral, continued engagement, and participant feedback
Participant outcomes	New arrests and charges, jail days, housing stability, and health outcomes
Program costs	Case-management and service expenses, alongside changes in criminal justice costs

Research from Seattle, San Francisco, North Carolina, and other communities supports adopting LEAD, while also demonstrating the importance of careful program implementation and evaluation. Overall, Buffalo stands to benefit from a properly designed program that offers alternatives to repeated arrest, connects people with needed services, and measures whether those efforts improve outcomes for participants and communities alike.

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