

Building an Organizational Culture That Values Law Enforcement Diversion

Catching Up With COSSAP, August 2020

Many police leaders across the country have recognized the need to connect individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) to community-based treatment services through pre-arrest diversion programs. Typically, these leaders benefit from the authority to bring together a myriad of community stakeholders to build treatment and service capacities.

Often, however, a more significant challenge is building a culture *within* police departments that supports diversion programs. As the success of diversion initiatives depends on the willingness of frontline officers to participate in their implementation, law enforcement leaders should aim to cultivate the kind of organizational culture that embraces the mission and goals of front-end diversion.

Leading Toward Shared Values

Similar to other types of organizations, many police agencies over the course of their growth encounter the need for transformational change to address challenges that undermine their efficacy.¹ An example would be the common realization that “the opioid crisis is not something we can arrest our way out of.” In recent years, this insight led leaders in the Lucas County, Ohio, Sheriff’s Office and the Gloucester, Massachusetts, Police Department to change the way they interact with opioid users. In turn, the diversion programs they developed inspired the adoption of similar programs in several regions of the United States impacted by the opioid crisis.

There are three key elements necessary for creating an organizational culture that supports and values pre-arrest diversion:

- Effective communication
- Clear policies and protocols
- Training

Effective Communication

When being introduced to new policies, procedures, or technologies, police officers—like many of us—can be resistant to change. To create an openness to change, police leaders should be authentic in the way that they communicate with their officers and staff. They must be able to effectively convey their goals and vision for the agency,



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as well as a sense of purpose in the shared work of the department. Equipped with that vision, effective leaders can draw upon their established credibility and instill in others the desire and confidence to accept change.

In encouraging the adoption of new policies regarding responses to substance abuse in the community, police leaders might note rising overdose rates, emphasize the

Creating Policies

When creating policies, it is important to emphasize the power of individual officer discretion, while incentivizing diversion over arrest as a measure of productivity. Agencies also should consider adding diversion responses—the number of times that officers decide to divert individuals to treatment or services—to an agency’s performance measures.

oath that the officers took to protect the community, and remind them that each person with an SUD is a person worthy of protection. They might also describe diversion programs as opportunities to improve community/police relations through the provision of lifesaving connections to treatment for people with SUDs instead of arrest.

Clear Policies and Protocols

It is important to give officers structure and guidance, especially when starting an initiative, so they have the necessary information to implement a diversion program. Policies provide a reminder of the purpose of the program, as well as practical steps for officers to perform their designated role in it.



Training

Training may be the most important element in molding the culture of an agency to value diversion and to obtain buy-in from internal staff as well as from external partners. The following valuable topics can provide officers with insight into, and empathy for, vulnerable populations and can reduce the stigma attached to individuals with SUDs:

- **Training on the neuroscience of addiction.** This helps officers understand the chemical changes happening in the brain of the drug user, why that results in specific behaviors including criminal activity, and what happens emotionally to addicted individuals as a result of chemical changes occurring in the brain.² This training helps officers recognize that addiction is a medical disease, not a moral failing.³
- **Training on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma.** This ensures that officers understand the impact of early trauma on development and life outcomes. ACEs are stressful events experienced before the age of 18, and individuals traumatized by them are more likely to become involved in antisocial or criminal behavior. Officers who receive training in this area learn skills to assist vulnerable individuals in crisis and recognize the role of trauma in individual decision making.⁴

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- **Understanding that relapse is not failure.** Training underscores for officers that addiction is a chronic disease involving biological processes in the brain and that 40 to 60 percent of people who have undergone treatment will experience some kind of relapse.⁵ Understanding that relapse is a normal part of recovery for many people builds a tolerance among officers who may have to divert a single individual multiple times.
- **Providing testimonials from people with lived experience,** especially fellow officers.
- **Highlighting success stories,** no matter how large or small. By sharing these stories, it creates a feedback loop that enables officers to see the impact they made on other peoples' lives and encourages them to continue to provide diversion.

Training should happen at all levels of the department and executive leadership should be present for as many trainings as possible to lend value and credibility to the program.⁶

Conclusion

When introducing change within a police agency, leaders should be steadfast about their goals and vision, yet patient. Change often represents loss and brings fear of the unknown, so allow time for officers to acclimate and adjust. When feasible, make the change as manageable as possible. Be prepared to counter apathy and cynicism by honestly addressing concerns and focusing on the expected benefits that the change will bring to the agency and the community. Ultimately, the key to success in creating a culture in which pre-arrest diversion programs are valued depends on leadership efforts to cultivate organizational values in which change is welcomed.

Endnotes

¹Barry Reynolds, "How to Change Culture in Your Police Department," PoliceOne.com (blog), March 13, 2014, <https://www.policeone.com/chiefs-sheriffs/articles/how-to-change-culture-in-your-police-department-rxBgAe4aoprlsrQP/>.

²Mike Bosse, "Why Police Officers Need to Understand Addiction," *The White House* (blog), November 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/11/14/why-police-officers-need-understand-addiction>.

³National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Drugs, Brains, and Behavior: The Science of Addiction," May 29, 2020, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/treatment-recovery>.

⁴Kat Ford et al., *An Evaluation of the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Informed Approach to Policing Vulnerability Training (AIAPVT) Pilot*, 2019.

⁵A. Thomas McLellan et al., "Drug Dependence, a Chronic Medical Illness: Implications for Treatment, Insurance, and Outcomes Evaluation," *JAMA* 284(13): 1689, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.284.13.1689>.

⁶Jessica Reichert and Lily Gleicher, "Rethinking Law Enforcement's Role on Drugs: Community Drug Intervention and Diversion Efforts," Chicago, IL: Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, January 2017.