Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://www.vera.org/blog/it-takes-a-village-blog-series/how-police-benefit-from-diversion-strategies

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Veras recent report, *It Takes a Village: Diversion Resources for Police and Families*, details how diversion programs provide families and communities resources to keep young people safe, on track, and out of the criminal justice system. But young people arent the only ones who benefit from diversion strategies. Police officers experience benefits too, through saved time, improved safety, and peace of mind.

For example, the report describes Heartland Family Service, a crisis mediation team in Sarpy County, Nebraska developed in 2015. The service provides immediate deescalation and conflict resolution services from licensed mental health therapists to families, youth, and communities during a police encounterand reduces the average call time for a police officer from two or three hours to just 76 minutes. This means that police have more time to respond to other calls, leaving them poised to better serve the needs of the community at large, says Jenny Stewart, the organizations director of crisis response services.

But police benefit far beyond being able to take more calls, she says. From the feedback received, law enforcement view [the crisis mediation team] as a valuable resource, she says. A lot of times they can clearly see the families are in need of services. This gives them options.

Other localities in the U.S. have developed or are in the process of creating their own programs to provide additional support for families and youth. Clark County, Nevada, is creating a 24-hour assessment center that will allow officers and families to connect with resources and service providers quickly, helping deescalate situations and ideally avoid future problem behavior, according to Jack Martin, director of Clark County Juvenile JusticeServices. And at the core of these police-focused strategies are tailored training strategies designed to help police respond to situations safely and effectively.

Chris McKee, formerly a school resource officer and currently a lieutenant with the Windsor, Connecticut Police Department, says that of the approximately 800 hours of training police receive, only 46 or so are spent working with people in the community. Although this varies across jurisdictions, he says reframing that training back toward people-first, community-focused policing will help divert youth from the juvenile justice system.

The whole thing with police trainingis that we are trained to come in as police officers, take control of the situation, make it stable, make it safe, figure out what happened, and if theres a crime, deal with it, and move on, McKee says. When were talking about kids, we can still respond like that, but it wont be successful. This became apparent when McKee himself tried to get a student with autism to leave a computer lab and go to his next class. The teacher was frustrated. The boy wouldnt budge. But McKee had another tool at his disposal. Because of his experience with this child personally, he knew the boy had a case manager at the school. The case manager wasnt an authority figure like he was, McKee says, but she was the person the student would listen to because of their unique relationship. Instead of removing the boy by force, McKee called the case manager, who calmly convinced him to leave the room. No harm done.

For me, [CIT-Y] training got me to recognize this is not a situation that I need to rush, because its just going to result in hands-on, he says. CIT-Y is shorthand for Crisis Intervention Team for Youth, a methodology that trains officers to recognize adolescent development and mental health problems in young people and teaches them to slow down and deescalate situations, thereby mitigating conflict.

At the crux of McKees strategy, however, is his experience within the school. While training certainly does give officers additional tools to deescalate problem behaviors, knowing specific kids, teachers, counselors, and social workers within the school is just asif not moreimportant, he says.

Nowadays, theres a lot more training and emphasis on working with counselors and social workers, he says. If a child who is normally jovial comes in looking sullen and disinterested in class, the behavior raises a red flag. Police or counselors in the school can intervene and connect children with necessary social servicesnot only arrest and punish, he says. It doesnt just have to be a police thing or a school thing, he says. We can work on stuff together.

Ultimately, McKee points out, diversion and officer discretion has less to do with the overall mental health of police officers and more to do with their peace of mind. Often, officers can reflect on their own childrenmany are moms and dads themselvesor on their own experiences when they were young. Generally speaking, he says, police do not want to detain youth for petty crimes or other infractions.

Over time, the lieutenant says diversion strategies make police officers jobs easier. Youth who have good relationships with police officers are more likely to report problems, helping police to do their jobs of keeping everyone safe. Everyoneincluding the officersbenefits from additional training and diversion away from the justice system.

PUBLICATION

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