

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/coronavirus-mental-health-and-the-enduring-importance-of-health-centered-crisis-response>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The novel coronavirus and efforts to contain it have brought about seismic life changes including the loss of lives and livelihoods [known to lead to mental health crises](#), and some police departments, like those in [Dayton, Ohio](#) and [Portland, Oregon](#), have reported an uptick in mental health-related calls for service. This [Mental Health Month](#), as the virus and its already devastating impacts spotlight the importance of [flattening the mental health curve](#), communities must revisit how their police departments respond to people with mental illness.

With [support from the NFL Foundation](#), Veras Serving Safely initiative promotes crisis response programs that connect people in crisis to community-based services while minimizing involvement with police and the criminal justice system. In today's fraught environment, however, vital social distancing efforts deprive people of traditional supports and services while creating new considerations for first responders, particularly in communities facing increased mental health calls.

Such an uptick presents communities with the challenge of safely resolving these situations while minimizing unnecessary contact that might spread the virus. Police agencies across the country have adopted [new response protocols](#) to prevent viral spread, including measures to reduce custodial arrests and broader efforts to limit interactions between officers and community members. With the *New York Times* reporting that [correctional facilities are among the most significant coronavirus clusters in the country](#), [decarceration efforts remain urgent](#) and require that police prioritize public health in their role as [system gatekeepers](#). Police responses to mental health calls are thus complicated by social distancing demands, personal protective equipment shortages, and overarching concerns about where and how to safely provide people in crisis with the care they need.

The role of police in responding to people with mental illness has never been straightforward, and the public health imperative that police shrink their footprint where safe and appropriate isn't new. Still, coronavirus presents communities with good reason to revisit their responses anew. Communities across the country have pursued a [wide variety of approaches](#), often simultaneously, to reduce justice system contact and improve health outcomes. These include:

By exploring new approaches and strengthening those they have in place, communities can decrease the likelihood that people in crisis end up in jails or crowded emergency rooms.

In addition to refining in-person approaches, communities should consider investing in and promoting the use of non-emergency lines that reduce in-person contact while providing callers with the human interaction they might seek out during a crisis.

Efforts like these have the potential to save money and reduce the need for an on-scene police presence.

Current events also underline the critical importance of enhancing crisis responses to protect essential workers. Health care professionals fight the uphill battle of saving lives with limited testing, hospital beds, and personal protective equipment, putting themselves [at great risk for depression](#), anxiety, and PTSD. Likewise, first responders already operating under stress are now confronting additional stressors, including an increased risk of exposure that makes them more likely to become vectors of transmission themselves. They [describe feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty](#) as they navigate obstacles in carrying out their jobs and struggle to mitigate a crisis that is far from over.

Communities can support the health of these workers and people seeking help with approaches to mental health calls that minimize human contact in non-emergency situations, direct people with serious mental illness toward appropriate medical settings, and reduce the excessive, increasingly dangerous use of jails.

Beyond its peaks, coronavirus may leave a lasting footprint on people's mental health, particularly for those most impacted by the crisis. As communities grapple with how to do more with less amid potential [revenue shortfalls](#), they should prioritize community-based supports and services for people with mental illness. Law enforcement agencies can resolve to do the same. As they continue to adapt to the current moment's most immediate challenges, police departments have the opportunity to reimagine their role in crisis response and champion lasting changes for a health-first approach.

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