

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/this-mental-health-month-and-beyond-collaboration-helps-police-serve-safely>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

People with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities are [more likely to encounter police than get medical help when they're in crisis](#).

Lapses in communication an individual in crisis struggling to understand an officer's command, an officer misinterpreting that struggle as willful noncompliance and countering more aggressively, exacerbating the crisis make these encounters unpredictable for officers and vulnerable community members alike. Too often, people are arrested and then incarcerated following a crisis rather than referred to community-based support and treatment.

A year ago, the Vera Institute of Justice supported through a cooperative agreement with the Bureau of Justice Assistance and working alongside [project partners](#) launched [Serving Safely](#). This initiative recognizes that law enforcement agencies must work collaboratively with advocates and service providers to develop response programs that support the immediate safety as well as the long-term well-being of people in crisis. Communities may pursue a [variety of models](#) to successfully respond to crisis situations, such as

With partners in the fields of policing, mental health, intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD), peer advocacy, prosecution, emergency medicine, and technology development, this national initiative has modeled the value of such multidisciplinary teams in addressing the complex challenges facing police departments every day.

Over the last year, we have

This [Mental Health Awareness Month](#), we reaffirm our commitment to building, supporting, and improving collaborative responses to people in crisis and reflect on the lessons learned from Serving Safely's efforts to date. For example, although police departments nationwide are increasingly recognizing the need to offer training in this area, many agencies lack the resources and institutionalized expertise to conduct trainings consistently and over time. Ongoing training is especially important in those departments where high attrition reduces the number of trained officers available to respond to crises at any given time. And some departments cover only mental illness in their trainings and do not address I/DD, which means officers may not understand the unique communication challenges some people with I/DD experience during police encounters, nor the services they might rely on for long-term support.

For many departments, there remains a need for greater coordination with community partners to ensure that police can direct people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities to treatment, support, and other resources when appropriate. Even where coordination is strong, departments may need to consider additional efforts to raise community awareness, measure their programs' impact, and explore opportunities to innovate and tailor their responses based on the resources available in the community.

By providing training and technical assistance across the country, identifying research gaps in crisis response services, and developing tools for the field, Serving Safely has enhanced police departments' capacity to respond effectively to people in crisis. At the same time, the initiative has shed light on the ways in which police working alone are ill-equipped and over-extended as the default first responders to people in need. Future research and investment in crisis response should explore new and expanded resources and partnerships that help communities improve safety for all.

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