

Justice Reform

Reimagining public safety in Cleveland

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Americans know that safe communities are ones where all residents have good schools, clean air and water, good-paying jobs, health care and greenspaces to enjoy. In communities with all the building blocks for safety, a large police presence doesn't seem as necessary. In the wake of high-profile killings of Black people by police, in Cleveland and across the nation, calls for a new approach to public safety are growing louder.

Advocates in Cleveland say city officials can better keep communities safe by strengthening civilian oversight and changing who responds to certain types of calls for emergency assistance. Over the past year, however, violent crime increased and reports suggest that police departments are struggling to recruit new officers. Debates about how best to keep communities safer are more contentious than ever. Five years after signing a consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice that found Cleveland police too often use excessive, unconstitutional force, Cleveland could be on the brink of a transformation.

What's happening in Cleveland?

Cleveland has long had initiatives that assist people experiencing mental health crises and other traumatic life events, and the city has implemented violence interruption programs. But the intersection of the consent decree and ongoing killings of Black people by police forces in Cleveland has further mobilized the public to call for change.

Local initiatives include crisis lines and mobile response teams for people experiencing mental health crises and homelessness, for example. A new co-responder initiative pairs mental health workers with patrol officers to assist individuals who present mental health needs after officers clear the scene. Data provided by the Cleveland Division of Police about calls police respond to suggest that as many as a third of emergency calls could be handled by unarmed responders rather than patrol officers. Furthermore, police used force in only 1% of calls involving individuals experiencing mental health crises and subjects in fewer than 3% of such calls had a gun or knife.

Cleveland advocates also want to strengthen civilian oversight of the police. A coalition including families who lost loved ones to police violence formed Citizens for a Safer Cleveland, which is proposing a November ballot initiative to strengthen existing oversight entities and make them independent from the current police and city power structures. If its place on the ballot is secured and voters approve the issue, the Community Police Commission (CPC), created under the consent decree and set to expire when the decree expires, would become permanent, independent, and exercise ultimate oversight on police discipline and policies, with its operations funded as a percentage of the police budget. The



ballot issue also seeks to give more power to the Office of Professional Standards, which investigates complaints against police officers, and the Civilian Police Review Board, which recommends discipline.

What's happening in other cities?

CAHOOTS, in Eugene and Springfield, Ore., short for “Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets,” has for more than 30 years been dispatching teams of medical staff and mental health workers through the Eugene police-fire-ambulance communications center and a Springfield non-emergency number.

In 2019, the program responded to an estimated 24,000 calls, with only 311 requiring police backup; the calls in Eugene accounted for almost 20% of all calls coming through the city’s public safety communications center. To date, no one has been seriously injured. Other cities, including Portland and Denver, have begun programs modeled after CAHOOTS, showing their potential in larger cities.

Closer to home, two initiatives in Rochester, N.Y., seek to change policing, and Durham, N.C. has created a new safety department to house alternative approaches to policing, redirecting vacant positions from its police department to staff the new office. The effort of advocates in Milwaukee led to a reduction in the police budget, redirecting money to summer youth programs and an emergency housing program.

Recommendations and conclusion

Cleveland can and should learn from how other cities are reimagining public safety. If a new approach here does not protect and serve everyone – especially the Black and brown residents who represent the majority of Clevelanders – transformation will be incomplete.

Civic leaders should take a multipronged approach to transforming public safety.

In collaboration with local advocates and service providers, they should build initiatives with the goal of providing residents an option to be served by unarmed, non-police first responders when they call 911. Evidence in Cleveland and from across the country supports this new approach.

They also must support strengthened, independent oversight of the police such as that proposed by Citizens for a Safer Cleveland in its November ballot issue.

These changes would not only help fulfill consent decree requirements, but they would save lives, put resources where they have the most impact, and allow police officers to focus on responding to, stopping, and solving crimes. What cannot be allowed to happen is a continuation of the status quo. The consent decree is a positive force for change, but on its own it is unlikely to deliver the kind of transformation that is being demanded by Clevelanders, whether they are advocating for new oversight and a different approach, or simply concerned for their safety. All Clevelanders, no matter how much money they make, the color of their skin, or their zip code, should receive the protection and service they deserve.