

Conference Report | June 2023

The Future of Alternative First Response

Building Sustainable and Scalable Programs

CENTER for INNOVATIONS
in COMMUNITY SAFETY
GEORGETOWN LAW

 Policing
Project
NYU School of Law



A Letter from Convening Organizers

This past June, we had the privilege of joining over 150 community safety practitioners and experts from nearly 30 jurisdictions across the country to discuss the growing movement to build non-police alternatives in emergency first response.

Since the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, there has emerged a growing national consensus that police officers should not be the first responders to every 911 call – that a badge and a gun can't resolve many of these needs and, too often, make things worse. Alternative response is designed to address this mismatch, and make sure that people get the help they need. And police themselves agree they are not trained or equipped to address many of the reasons people call 911 in the first place.

The convening, held on June 1 and 2 in Washington, D.C., and co-hosted by the Policing Project at NYU Law School and the Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law, brought together emergency response experts, community members, first responders, government officials, funders of alternative response work, researchers, and others from dozens of communities to learn, share ideas, and discuss the future of alternative first response in their communities and nationally.

This gathering confirmed what the people doing this work day-to-day already know – this is a community-led, organic movement. And it is at a pivotal moment of growth and opportunity. The rapid expansion of alternative first response programs across the country makes it clear – it is no longer a question of whether to invest in these programs. Rather, the question is how to help these programs succeed in their mission to provide more effective responses.

This convening was an important step in planning for the future of alternative first response, and setting these programs up to become a central part of our public safety apparatus. We explored challenges that programs face, and began a collaborative process to plot out their solutions. The connections made and ideas shared at the convening are helping to propel this work forward, and we look forward to continuing to collaborate across cities, fields, and perspectives.

Thank you to our partners, whose counsel helped give rise to the event and whose participation made it a success: the public safety departments and alternative response programs in Albuquerque, NM; Atlanta, GA; Dayton, OH; Denver, CO; San Francisco, CA; and Tucson, AZ. Thank you to our sponsors, without whom this work and events like this would not be possible. And thank you to all of the participants, attendees, and staff.

Alternative first response is an inherently collaborative effort. We are enormously grateful for your time, your expertise, and your shared dedication to this work and its future.

With gratitude,


Tahir Duckett, Executive Director, Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law

Freya Rigterink, Executive Director, the Policing Project at NYU School of Law





Background and Key Takeaways



In the wake of sustained protests for racial justice and widespread calls for rethinking the role and function of policing in the United States, municipalities across the country have begun to establish alternative first responder programs that utilize peer responders, clinicians, and other non-law enforcement personnel – either alone or alongside police officers – to respond to a subset of their calls. With limited exceptions, these programs are in their infancy, as advocates and local governments experiment with a variety of models. As this field has developed, the Policing Project at NYU School of Law and the Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law (CICS) have begun working to understand the challenges faced by these programs and how to develop solutions. One of the greatest needs identified by stakeholders is to bring together practitioners, researchers, and community partners from across the country in order to develop and build a strong community of practice for this burgeoning field.

Responding to that call, CICS and the Policing Project co-hosted a national convening at Georgetown Law School from June 1-2, 2023. The convening, titled **The Future of Alternative First Response: Building Sustainable and Scalable Programs**, brought together over 150 practitioners, community members, researchers, experts, and other stakeholders from around the country to learn, share information, problem-solve, and innovate. The convening was organized in partnership with Albuquerque Community Safety, Atlanta

Policing Alternatives & Diversion, the Dayton Mediation Response Unit, Denver Public Safety, the City of San Francisco, and the City of Tucson. Over the course of two days, participants heard from over 30 panelists and speakers in plenary sessions focused on topics ranging from risk assessment to what the future of alternative first response holds as programs expand. Attendees also participated in workshops where they discussed critical issues they are facing within their own work, and brainstormed solutions as part of building this community of practice.

During the convening, participants identified several pressing questions about the field of alternative response: its foundation, its implementation, and its future. Conversations centered around coming to a shared understanding of:

- What is “alternative first response”? What is it not? Where is there consensus in the field and where are their opportunities for productive difference?
- Where are challenges and opportunities for growth?
- What does the movement need?
- What questions does the movement need to answer?

These questions were addressed over two days of productive conversation and collaboration across programs and

municipalities. These conversations generated several key takeaways rooted in the questions above and that provide insight into the future of this field:

Communities are Deeply Invested in Developing and Expanding Alternative First Response

Participants and panelists all noted that there is growing consensus across the country for the need to build alternative systems that end our overreliance on policing as the only community safety response. This consensus towards alternative first response has grown over the past five years, made possible by sustained community organizing around racial justice. Programs

across the country were built from the demands and organizing efforts of communities and organizations most impacted by over-policing. Building on the momentum of this movement and centering community-led practice is critical in continuing to develop alternative first response programs.

In communities that have alternative response models, demand is growing rapidly for programs to expand – both in the scale of their work, and the types of calls they respond to. Programs are working hard to nimbly expand their reach while addressing the growing pains that come with this process. Programs that began by handling a narrow band of calls types have rapidly seen their share of 911 calls grow considerably, as communities and other public safety stakeholders better understand their role and appreciate the unmet needs these programs are addressing.

Evaluation & Narrative Building Are Simultaneous Projects

Conference participants spoke at length about continuing to educate the public about what alternative first response is, and when and how to utilize these programs. The polling data presentation by Celinda Lake of Lake Research Partners and Quintin Williams of the Joyce Foundation showed that there is a desire for non-police responses – particularly in matching the right professionals to each type of call and situation – but a general lack of knowledge about what these alternative responses look like and how they operate.

Throughout the conference, participants and panelists alike stressed the importance of evaluation and research in the continued growth and sustainability in this field. However, there is a clear need



“Jurisdictions often overly relied on policing when it came to public safety. Not just over-reliance on police but the normalization of the over-reliance on policing.”

Christy Lopez, Faculty Co-Director of the Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law

to move beyond traditional structures. The evaluation of alternative first response programming needs robust and creative thinking around measuring success and outcomes, both in determining what constitutes success and in the methods used to measure progress. In discussing what this approach to research might need, participants and panelists noted:

- **Language matters:** the way each alternative first response program communicates both its purpose and its functions matters, not only in clarifying what alternative first response is but also what it is not. Panelists noted this can help with ‘scope creep’ and ensuring programs are not brought into the fold of practices that are meant to confine and control people in need (e.g., homeless encampment sweeps). Another common theme that emerged was the need to move beyond traditional academic language that can be inaccessible and isolating, and to instead move towards alignment with the language that best fits a specific context and community.
- **Expanding beyond randomized control trials:** National Institute of Justice Director Dr. Nancy La Vigne was among the panelists who stressed the importance of thinking about research practices differently, shifting away from focusing exclusively on randomized control trials and towards implementation studies that guide practitioners in how to begin and grow alternative first response programs. Dr. La Vigne and Dr. Rebecca Neusteter of the University of Chicago Health Lab also noted that traditional



research practices that encourage distance and objectivity might undermine necessary collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and communities. Instead, programs should partner with researchers as they establish their programs, so that researchers can gain knowledge and understanding of both programming and evaluation needs. Panelists also noted that impact evaluations should be supplemented with implementation research, which tells practitioners not just whether their program met their outcomes but whether their program was implemented with fidelity and which components added the most value. Action research should also be utilized, creating feedback loops in real-time so programs can make iterative improvements along the way rather than waiting for the results of multi-year studies.

Programs Need Funding and Sustainability

Funding remains one of the most important, and challenging, aspects of building alternative first response infrastructure and longevity. Panelists and participants discussed the necessity of establishing long-term political commitments and funding streams in addition to looking beyond local municipalities, whose budgets can be limited. Participants also discussed the importance of developing a coalition of practitioners, researchers, and funders to elevate alternative first response as a key issue within the broader movements to reform the criminal legal system. The convening revealed a need for sustained dialogue around challenges with Medicaid reimbursement as a funding stream, and navigating the complications and differences in local, state, and national funding.

We Need to Invest in Developing the Responder Workforce

One of the most pressing challenges for the field of alternative first response is around building and sustaining its workforce. Many programs noted challenges in hiring and retaining staff, and stressed the need to rethink recruitment and retention for the alternative first response workforce. Discussions revolved around developing peer and community responders and hiring those with lived experiences that reflect the community's needs and priorities. To do this, programs will have to reimagine qualifications and education requirements for positions. As Eric Cumberbatch of the Center for Policing Equity posited, "[hiring] standards have been set by people in power; what if they were set by those with proximity to the issues?" Panelists also noted that the development of standards for alternative first responders needs to balance the tension between both the need for standardization and the importance of customization according to each community's specific needs – an important consideration for hiring practices, professional development, and more.

Alongside recruitment challenges, convening participants also noted the importance of creating a trauma-informed model of care and sustainability for workers within alternative first response programs. Prioritizing the health and well-being of first responders remains a priority and a challenge as the workforce grows.

Programs Must Avoid Replicating Carceral Logics and Harm

At the center of every conversation during the convening was the recognition that alternative first response programming must not replicate the harms of the current systems of policing and the broader criminal legal system, which – as panelist and youth activist Jordan Dean reminded participants – are rooted in the historical and contemporary manifestations of anti-Black racism and slavery. As CICS faculty co-director Christy Lopez noted, "Unless we confront the logic that has led policing to be what it is, we will replicate those harms in new systems... [we need to] dismantle the logic that is punitive, and move to systems of care."

Alongside these important conversations, there was agreement that policing still remains a large part of the infrastructure of community safety in this country, and there is a need to determine when and how alternative first response programs work with and alongside police departments. Reimagining the policing role will be important as alternative first response programs grow, ensuring that policing isn't further militarized, but instead brought into the conversation around helping to dismantle the punitive logics that currently dominate our broader criminal legal system.



“We did a lot of work initially, and we’re still doing a lot of work to create, maintain, and cultivate those relationships [with the police department]. And what ended up happening was that over time our value was proven, and officers began to realize that [they] can call the Person in Crisis (PIC) team out to calls that don’t require law enforcement.”

Alia Henton-Williams, Manager, Crisis Intervention Services, Rochester, New York



“This coalition was led...by folks who most keenly felt the experience of frequent police contact on the one hand and inaccessible community resources on the other...if we cannot start from the premise that we need investment in our community infrastructure, then we will continue to get stuck once we create new pathways.”

Moki Macias, Executive Director, Atlanta Policing Alternative & Diversion Initiative (PAD), Atlanta, Georgia



Plenary Session Highlights

Plenary Session 1

What is Possible: Mental Health, Mediation, and Everything Else

Moderated by:

Barry Friedman, Faculty Director, Policing Project at NYU School of Law

Panelists:

Alia Henton-Williams, Manager, Crisis Intervention Services, Rochester, New York

Ivy Lee, Policy Advisor for Public Safety and Victims' Rights to San Francisco Mayor London Breed

Raven Cruz Loaiza, Mediation Response Unit Coordinator, Dayton, Ohio

Christy Lopez, Faculty Co-Director of the Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law

Summary

The opening panel discussion sought to lay the groundwork for the current scope of the national alternative responder space. The panel noted that for decades communities have overly relied on policing – and while these systems of response will take time to unlearn, there are already a wide range of alternative response models being built around the country, including the three represented in this first plenary session: Dayton, Ohio's Mediation Response Unit; Rochester, New York's Crisis Intervention Services; and San Francisco, California's Street Crisis Response Team.

Together, the panelists representing these three cities demonstrated the incredible range of call types that alternative responders across the country are now handling, and discussed the process and challenges of expanding into these issue areas over time. Alia Henton-Williams of Rochester said she and her colleagues initially responded to just three types of calls for help, all

of which were related to mental health. After proving their unique value – and after building a relationship with the Rochester Police Department – they now respond to more than 12 call types, including substance use issues, homelessness, domestic violence, and youth and family issues. Raven Cruz Loaiza of Dayton spoke about a similar experience, in which the city's mediation team has expanded from 10 to 21 call types, now taking calls for wellness checks, neighbor disputes, public intoxication, and others. Professor Christy Lopez discussed an important caution for the field, as it expands and matures over time – that we take care to ensure we do not replicate the harms of policing. All of the alternative responder models on the panel prioritize helping humans first and strive to reduce the impact of enforcement on vulnerable communities.



“We often hear it said that ‘people call the police,’ but really people call 911 for help and we send the police. Yet police themselves agree they are not trained or equipped to address many of the reasons people call 911 in the first place.”

Barry Friedman, Faculty Director, Policing Project at NYU School of Law



Plenary Session 2

Getting Started Scope, Theory of Change, Setting up for Success

Moderated by:

Max Markham, Vice President of Policy and Community Engagement, Center for Policing Equity

Panelists:

Kristin Bronson, Executive Director, Colorado Lawyers Committee

Moki Macias, Executive Director, Atlanta Policing Alternative & Diversion Initiative (PAD), Atlanta, Georgia

Rebecca Neusteter, Executive Director, University of Chicago Health Lab

Summary

The second panel of the convening focused on getting alternative first response programs off the ground, and how to frame programs around a community-driven theory of change. Every jurisdiction's community has different needs, and alternative first response models must design their programming and operations to address those needs. For example, Atlanta Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative (PAD) is a non-profit organization that works to reduce arrest and incarceration of vulnerable communities by diverting them from police contact and instead connecting residents to resources and community support. PAD can receive referrals from police officers or can be contacted directly by community members and via 311. This approach is different from Denver's Support Team

Assisted Response (STAR) program, which operates from within the Denver city government. The STAR program can be dispatched to calls directly from 911 as long as they are low-risk and low-acuity.

Having buy-in and trust from the community is only one hurdle that these programs face when getting started. Panelists shared experiences and offered advice for addressing a host of start-up challenges, including: navigating legal issues, supporting the workforce, developing appropriate training, handling collective bargaining issues, and planning for data collection and evaluation. Their dedication to serving the community and their collaborative, solutions-oriented approach allowed these stakeholders to overcome barriers and successfully launch new programs.



“911 Dispatchers do not receive the same respect as other first responders and that needs to change.”

Rebecca Neusteter, Executive Director, University of Chicago Health Lab



“There just needs to be more community education regarding the types of calls that need to go to 911...we are calling every single caller back that leaves their information to say ‘this call was appropriate for PAD’, [so that callers] have a better understanding of the actual concern.”

Chyna Quarker, Director of Community Response Services, Atlanta Policing Alternative & Diversion Initiative (PAD), Atlanta, Georgia

Plenary Session 3

Assessing Risk: Dispatch, Call Taking, and Decision-Making

Moderated by:

Dr. Jessica Gillooly, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Suffolk University

Panelists:

Andrew Dameron, Director of Emergency Communications, Denver, Colorado

Chyna Quarker, Director of Community Response Services, Atlanta Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative (PAD), Atlanta, Georgia

Mariela Ruiz-Angel, Director, Albuquerque Community Safety Department, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Greg Stoddard, Senior Research Director, University of Chicago Crime Lab

Summary

This panel discussed how agencies make complex decisions about when to send the police, and identified ways agencies can help practitioners, especially 911 call takers and dispatchers, understand the potential implications of sending the police instead of an alternative responder. A “police-first” mentality is often adopted inside 911 emergency call centers because call takers and dispatchers have spent their careers sending the police, and may be hesitant to send new, unarmed responders into many situations, even if the risk is minimal.

For alternative response systems to thrive, it is critical to evaluate each call on its own terms. This begins with

collecting the appropriate information from the caller. Historically, call takers asked a more limited set of questions, which can lead to mis-assessing risk factors and missing opportunities to send alternative responders. Utilizing available data, continuing to adjust call taking protocols and policies, building collaborative relationships between call center staff and first responders, and carefully considering factors specific to each call will lead to better decision-making, thus increasing the chance that alternative responders can be dispatched to meet community needs.



Plenary Session 4

Building Relationships Based on Mutual Trust

Moderated by:

Dr. Tamara Leech, 2022 Andrew Carnegie Fellow

Panelists:

Maria (Maru) Eugenia Carrasco, Promotora, Coalición de Derechos Humanos

Jordan Dean, Young, Not Silent Leader for Youth at the Center

Ariel Heifetz Knobel, Vice President of Community Engagement and Education, Institute for American Policing Reform

Chief (Ret.) Nicholas Sensley, Founder and CEO, Institute for American Policing Reform

Summary

This panel focused on the importance of building mutual trust between the community and our public safety system, including any non-police alternative programs that are designed to play a new first response role. Historically, people of color and other marginalized communities have been subject to systems of coercion and control that pervade not only policing, but also healthcare and mental health practices.

The panel discussed the importance of alternative response programs not replicating these harmful systems and practices. Panelists also discussed the challenges that alternative first response programs face in building trust with communities alongside promising strategies for engaging those most impacted by these harmful practices in building and sustaining systems of care.

“[U.S. history] has provided this insight of what police were meant for. When we talk about police, we need to acknowledge the origin of their purpose. When we do, we can better understand the disconnect marginalized communities might have with these officers, or any other first responder.”

Jordan Dean, Young, Not Silent Leader for Youth at the Center



Plenary Session 5 The Future of Alternative Response

Moderated by:

Mike Thompson, Independent Consultant

Panelists:

Eric Cumberbatch, Senior Vice President, Policy & Community Engagement, Center for Policing Equity

Cal Jenkins, Manager of Research and Evaluation for the Clear Pathways Initiative, Peg's Foundation

Anne Larsen, Project Manager, Council of State Governments Justice Center

Amy Watson, Professor, Wayne State University - School of Social Work

Summary

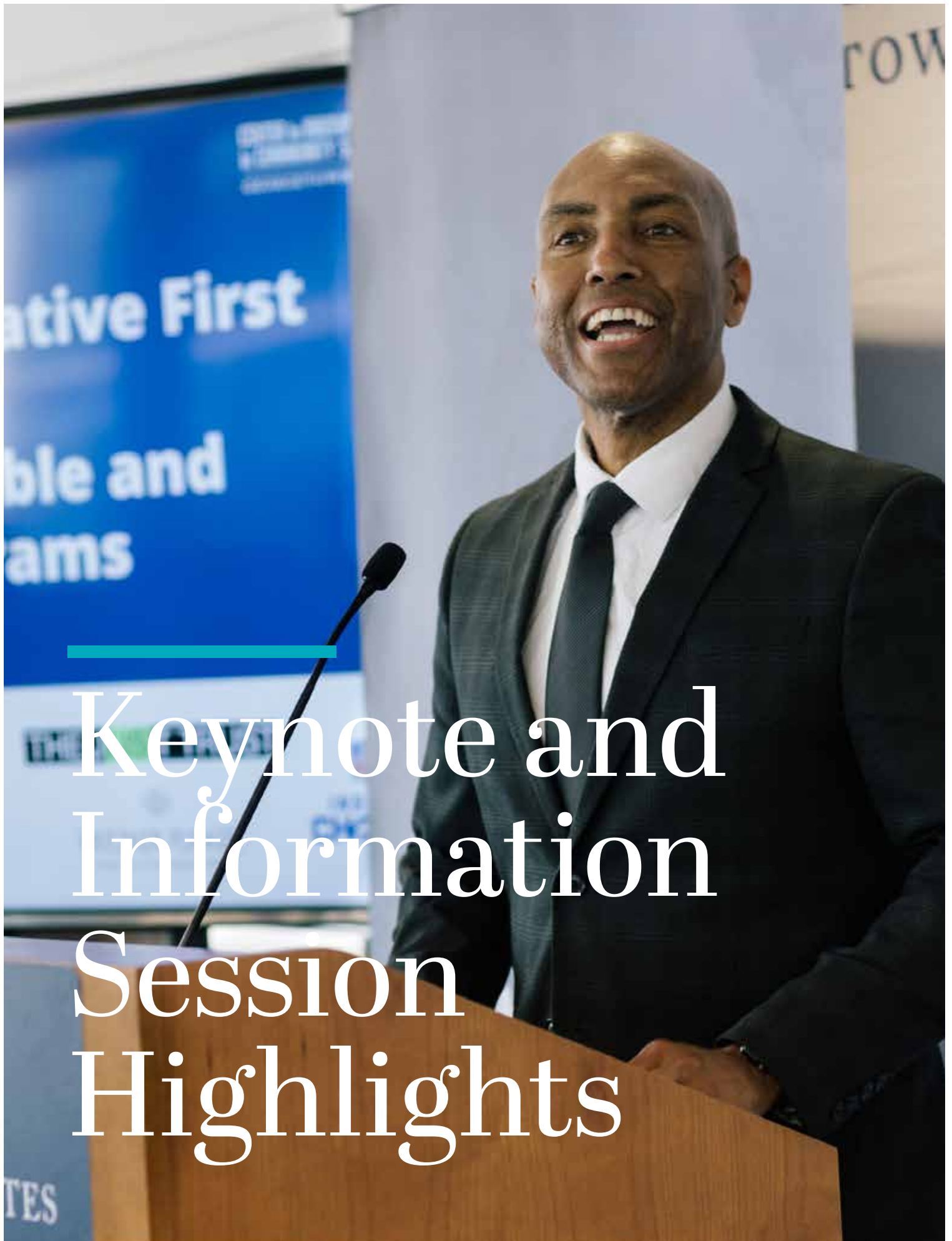
This panel focused on the future of alternative response programs. Panelists noted that a long term goal in the field is to move from being an *alternative* response to becoming the first response for community safety needs. As we move towards that future, panelists identified several shifts that need to happen. First, changing the “police first” culture of our society will allow alternative response units to gain the legitimacy they need to scale up. Second, working to dismantle systematic racism within our country will help us create systems of care that

center dignity and respect. Third, we must balance the need for community-specific alternative first response programming while also acknowledging the need to develop some standards for the field – from measuring performance to designing systems and protocols, a common language and set of tools that can be customized will support the field as it continues to grow.



“Are we seeing people as risks we need to assess or people we need to support?”

Amy Watson, Professor, Wayne State University - School of Social Work



Keynote and Information Session Highlights



Keynote Presentation

Resources to Support the Field

Karhlton Moore, Director, Bureau of Justice Assistance

Summary

Director Moore from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) visited the convening to hear from participants and discuss how the BJA can help support this work. Moore emphasized that in order to develop a comprehensive, sustainable alternative response system, it is critical to focus on partnerships. BJA provides funding that many jurisdictions utilize to create and expand innovative public safety and response infrastructure. Successful implementation of alternative response both starts and ends with successful engagement with collaborative partners.

“Keep doing the great work that you do. You may walk past a stranger on the street and they may never know you have changed their life.”

Karhlton Moore, Director, Bureau of Justice Assistance

Keynote Presentation

Evaluation and Impact

Dr. Nancy La Vigne, Director, National Institute of Justice

Tahir Duckett, Executive Director, Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law

Barry Friedman, Faculty Director, Policing Project at NYU School of Law

Summary

Dr. Nancy La Vigne, Director of the National Institute of Justice, visited the convening community to talk about what researchers, community members, and practitioners should be thinking about when planning evaluations. Director La Vigne stressed that evaluations and research of alternative first response programs must be conducted in true partnership with community members – communities are experts in their own needs and priorities, not subjects of research to be exploited. Conducting research with communities, reporting findings in accessible language, and allowing the findings to empower the community should be prioritized as we incorporate evaluations into alternative first response models.

“We should conduct research through a racial equity lens.”

Dr. Nancy La Vigne, Director, National Institute of Justice



Keynote Presentation

National Polling Data on Approaches to Public Safety

Panelists

Celinda Lake, President, Lake Research Partners

Dr. Quintin Williams, Chief Engagement Officer, The Joyce Foundation

Summary

In early 2023, the Joyce Foundation supported a public opinion research project by Lake Research Partners and the Tarrance Group exploring the public's views of, and reaction to, different approaches to addressing public safety. The survey results shined a light on public support for alternative first responders, and identified narratives about first response that resonated with Americans. Some key findings from the research included:

- Strong appetites among voters for implementing public safety strategies outside of our traditional police response.
- Overwhelming majorities of voters agree that “both parties need to work together to address the root causes of crime and violence.”
- Overwhelming majorities also agree that “we need to do a better job matching the right professionals to each 911 call response.”
- Solid majorities believe “we should not use police officers for mental health distress calls.”
- The public lacks familiarity with who alternative responders are. We need to socialize these new models with the public, so community members can picture who does this work.
- The public supports a combination of alternative response with police (i.e., co-responder model or back up models) more so than a purely alternative response model, because they fear non-violent situations can escalate and lead to violence.
- Messaging strategies that resonated with voters focused on discussing successful pilot programs, the wide variety of emergency calls that occur, and the lack of existing support for 911 dispatchers. Messages which focused on saving tax dollars and bloated police budgets resonate less with voters.

“A lot of the blockages are not opposition, it is the absence of a template. People don't know what we are talking about.”

Celinda Lake, President, Lake Research Partners



Opening Remarks for Day 2

Darius Baxter, Chief Engagement Officer, GOOD Projects

Summary

Darius Baxter, the CEO of GOOD Projects, gave an exhilarating speech about the need to reimagine our current public safety system. GOOD Projects is a Washington, D.C. based non-profit organization that empowers youth and their families to live fulfilling lives free from poverty. Baxter believes that not only can public safety be changed by alternative response programs but that these programs can also alter the effects of generational poverty.

“We are here today because we believe in the power of change. One day it won't be an alternative response but the norm.”

Darius Baxter, Chief Engagement Officer, GOOD Projects



The Future of Alternative First Response: Building Sustainable and Scalable Programs

Convening Sponsors

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Convening Co-host Cities and Programs

Albuquerque Community Safety, Atlanta Policing Alternatives & Diversion, Dayton Mediation Response Unit, Denver Public Safety, City of San Francisco, City of Tucson

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Design by Brent Futrell, Georgetown Law Communications; Photography by Michelle Frankfurter

Watch a video from the convening [here](#).

Please contact Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna (lucia.mock@georgetown.edu) at the Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law for additional information.