



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Health and Public Safety Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, February 27, 2023

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Kelly at 6:01 pm and adjourned at 8:52 pm with a roll call vote of all in favor (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Davis, and Chair Kelly), none opposed, and none absent.

Councilor McLaughlin was unable to attend, and President Ewen-Campen named Councilor Wilson to serve in his place.

Others present: Neha Singh – Mayor’s Office, Jim Vetter – Social-Emotional Learning Alliance for Massachusetts, Tobin Rodriguez – Boston Medical Center, Lauren Leone, Patricia Contente – SPD, Sean Donovan, Stephanie Guirand – Cambridge HEART, Andrew Dameron – City and County of Denver, Earl Miller – CRESS, Stephanie Widzowski – Clerk of Committees.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Charlotte Kelly, Vice Chair Lance L. Davis and Jake Wilson

- Committee Minutes (ID # [23-0248](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Public Health and Public Safety Committee Meeting of February 13, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

AYE: Chairperson Kelly, Vice Chair Davis and Wilson

Presentation

- Order (ID # [23-0278](#)) By Councilor Kelly, Councilor Burnley Jr. and Councilor Wilson That this Council discuss alternative emergency response methods with local mental health care providers.

Taken together with items 22-1373 and 23-0279. Chair Kelly sponsored a series of presenters: Jim Vetter, a Ward 7 resident and the Executive Director for the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance for Massachusetts; Tobin Rodriguez, a Ward 3 resident and Director of Emergency Psychiatric Services for Boston Medical Center; Dr. Lauren Leone, a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and Board-Certified Art Therapist; Patricia Contente, Director of COHR (*Community Outreach, Help & Recovery*) in SPD; Stephanie Guirand, a senior researcher with The Black Response and Board President of Cambridge HEART (*Holistic Emergency Alternative Response Team*); Andrew Dameron, Director of Emergency Communications for the City and County of Denver, CO; Earl Miller, the Director of CRESS (*Community Responders for Equity, Safety, and Service Programs*) in

Amherst, MA; and Sean Donovan, the former Implementation Director of DCC (*Division of Community Care*) in Northampton, MA.

Presentation Overviews

Dir. Vetter, Mr. Rodriguez and Dr. Leone presented on the attached AER slides. Dir. Vetter introduced the topic of alternative emergency response by talking about his brother, a longtime Somerville resident who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and his experience with law enforcement and EMS. He also shared his experience watching police intercept someone in crisis outside his home as an example of why change is needed, and described a multi-tiered system of support for mental health.

Mr. Rodriguez described and acknowledged the shortcomings of current support lines, including Cambridge/Somerville Emergency Services (CSES) that work with a clinic in Cambridge. He listed resources that Somerville should strive to offer vulnerable members in the short-term, such as warming centers and safe consumption sites, but also said that Somerville should increase outreach about these resources.

Dr. Leone talked about the range of alternative emergency response models and listed five important facets to consider, such as limiting mandated reporting and operating with a non-police dispatch. She described other qualities alternatives might have and stressed that these responses must be based in anti-racism and in transformative justice.

Dir. Contente presented on the attached COHR slides. She described key elements of the program, such as jail diversion. One note shared during the presentation is that COHR records are kept separate from SPD, but there is mandated reporting for some topics. She also talked about outreach programs and said that the Overdose After Care Team does include a plainclothes officer as required by the grant. Dir. Contente gave updates to services in the area, including a new state initiative called Roadmaps to Health that established a community behavioral health center in Cambridge.

Ms. Guirand presented on the attached TBR slides, which focused on key questions to consider when building an alternative response program. These considerations include where the program will be housed, whether the program intervenes before, during or after crisis, who the program should serve, training for program workers, and how the public can reach the service. Ms. Guirand stated that because more traditional response services are available at the federal and state levels, Somerville can explore more innovative options. She described different models of alternative response through the factors discussed before.

Dir. Dameron gave a background on how Denver developed the STAR (Support Team Assisted Response) program and said that licensed clinicians are part of STAR for “last resort” scenarios in which law enforcement would traditionally be called. He talked about the call intake process and how the public can access STAR through multiple lines, including 911. He also

described how Denver treats STAR less as an alternative to policing and more as its own entity with its own infrastructure.

Dir. Miller spoke to the structure of CRESS and services it provides, such as wellness checks, transportation, and housing for residents facing homelessness. He talked about how Amherst prioritized protections for CRESS workers, such as union involvement and pay. He noted that CRESS does not have a clinic, but does work with local clinics.

Mr. Donovan talked about the takeaways from a commission created in the wake of George Floyd's death, including that there is a mixed level of trust with mental health agencies as well as police. He said that there seemed to be more honesty and openness in discussions on this commission because police were not included. He discussed takeaways from his work as Implementation Director, including remediation training and on how dispatch callers code a situation. He stressed the importance of supporting and following the lead of community-based organizations led by marginalized groups.

Questions from Committee members

Chair Kelly asked Dir. Vetter, Mr. Rodriguez and Dr. Leone what wishes come up for alternative emergency response when talking to other residents. Dr. Leone spoke to the fear many queer and trans people feel of how they may be treated during an emergency, and contrasted hotlines that may geolocate and call for police to peer-supported "warmlines". She said it is important to have options that feel truly safe. Dir. Vetter added that assistance should start *before* crisis with emotional and social supports.

Councilor Wilson asked Dir. Contente if the line-share COHR work is a result of referrals from SPD. Dir. Contente confirmed that, but COHR now gets referrals from many sources.

Councilor Wilson asked Ms. Guirand for examples of types of calls that other communities have designated as appropriate for alternative response, and whether the community mediator approach mentioned by Dir. Dameron is similar to the violence disrupter model. Ms. Guirand said that they are separate, but Boston has something similar called unity circles, and described a "circle keeper" model that can aid the community accountability process.

Chair Kelly asked how peer responders working with HEART feel about their work and what their impact is for those they assist. Ms. Guirand said that many peer responders already care for family members or neighbors, and now receive pay to do so. She added that they are knowledgeable about their communities, and have a fuller context that can be used to get the best help for those in need.

Councilor Wilson asked Dir. Dameron about the impact of STAR on police

service call volume and the municipal budget for their police department. Dir. Dameron said the calls diverted to STAR is about 3%, but that this has freed DPD to focus on other types of calls. He also talked about STAR responses directed from DPD in the field when an officer determined that the situation did not require a police response. He added that STAR funding came from the general fund, but also from a city ordinance for mental health and substance use programs.

Chair Kelly asked Mr. Donovan to speak to barriers implementing DCC in Northampton. He talked about call types such as wellbeing checks and of the multi-level scale of policies that need to be replaced. He named Interrupting Criminalization as a resource and advised Somerville to look at groups unaffiliated with city departments are doing. He also advised to avoid co-response.

Administration Updates

Liaison Singh gave an update on work from RSJ about a public safety task force that will form in March or April and will develop policy recommendations on issues such as emergency response. Chair Kelly encouraged the Administration to consider Mr. Donovan's comments about how police presence impacted the openness of conversations in his work.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Update

3. Order
(ID # [22-1373](#))

By Councilor Wilson, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Kelly and Councilor Burnley Jr.

That the Director of Health and Human Services and the Director of Community Outreach, Help and Recovery appear before the Public Health and Public Safety Committee to discuss an alternative emergency response program.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Discussion

4. Order
(ID # [23-0279](#))

By Councilor Kelly, Councilor Burnley Jr. and Councilor Wilson

That this Council discuss alternative emergency response and/or other non-police emergency response methods that other municipalities have pursued.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Referenced Documents:

- PHPS - 2023-02-27 2022 STAR Report 2 final (with #22-1373, 23-0278, 23-0279)
- PHPS - 2023-02-27 AER in Somerville (with 22-1373, 23-0278, 23-0279)
- PHPS - 2023-02-27 COHR (with 22-1373)
- PHPS - 2023-02-23 Somerville City Council - TBR Presentation (with 22-1373, 23-0278, 23-0279)
- PHPS - 2023-02-27 WellPower STAR Annual Report 2022 (with 22-1373, 23-0278, 23-0279)