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HOW TO REDUCE REPEAT ENCOUNTERS:
A Brief for Law Enforcement Executives

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A pressing challenge for law enforcement agencies is how to effectively respond to people they routinely encounter. Often known as "high utilizers," these individuals come into frequent contact with law enforcement officers or other emergencey services—usually for low-level, misdemeanor crimes or non-emergent concerns—and many have unmet behavioral health, housing, or other social services needs. For example, in Camden, New Jersey, 5 percent of adults accounted for 25 percent of all arrests over a 5-year period.[1] And in Wake County, North Carolina, of the 36,665 people who entered the jail over a period of 2 years, 5 percent (1,333 people) were jailed 4 or more times. Of those people, 807 had contact with not only the jail, but also homelessness and emergency medical services.[2] Encountering these same people again and again overburdens law enforcement agencies, strains limited resources, and can be frustrating and demoralizing for officers who are unable to help the individual.[3]

The four steps below provide a practical guide to addressing the needs of the people officers frequently encounter while reducing their contact with the criminal justice system over time.

> "We want officers to have resources that they need to effectively respond to people in crisis, which is why our department has partnered with local homeless and health systems to build out community services, increasing the chances of success for the people we encounter most frequently and reducing the burden on our officers."
>
> *– Chief Gordon Ramsay, Wichita, KS, Police Department*

What Can Law Enforcement Leaders Do?

STEP 1 — **Identify people in your community who are high utilizers**

STEP 2 — **Develop alternate response options**

STEP 3 — **Establish clear policies and procedures for encounters**

STEP 4 — **Review performance regularly**

Who are the "high utilizers" in your community?

While the definition of "high utilizer" may differ across systems, in the law enforcement context, the term typically refers to people who have frequent encounters (e.g., arrests, citations, 911 calls) with police, fire, and EMS. The level of law enforcement contact that categorizes a person as a "high utilizer" can vary by jurisdiction. Similarly, jurisdictions may use different terms for this population such as "frequent utilizers," "familiar faces," or "complex care clients." In many instances, these people have serious mental illnesses, substance use disorders, or other significant health and social services needs,[4] which can leave them stuck in a revolving door between the criminal justice system and other systems like health and housing.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

CRISIS AND HEALTH CARE SERVICES

HOUSING SERVICES

1. Anne Milgram, et al., "Integrated Health Care and Criminal Justice Data-Viewing the Intersection of Public Safety, Public Health, and Public Policy Through a New Lens: Lessons from Camden, New Jersey," *Papers from the Executive Sessions on Community Corrections* (2018).
2. SAS Institute, *Wake County: Executive Summary Report* (SAS Institute, Inc., 2017), https://wwwcache.wral.com/asset/news/local/2018/04/25/17511328/SAS-DMID1-5ekcm9dkz.pdf.
3. Ann Milgram et al., "Integrated Health Care and Criminal Justice Data-Viewing the Intersection of Public Safety, Public Health, and Public Policy Through a New Lens: Lessons from Camden, New Jersey."
4. Lynn Overmann, Angela LaScala-Gruenewald, and Ashley Winstead, "Using Data to Reinvent America's Crisis Response Systems," *Modern Justice* (The Arnold Foundation, 2018): 4, https://craftmediabucket.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/PDFs/DDJ-MODERN-JUSTICE.pdf.

4 STEPS TO REDUCING REPEAT ENCOUNTERS

STEP 1 — Identify people in your community who are high utilizers

- In order to design an effective response strategy, you need to understand the complete picture of people who are high utilizers in your jurisdiction, including where and how officers are coming into contact with them.

- Data enable you to craft an effective response that matches the scale and needs of this population. You should start by:

  - examining local law enforcement data including arrests, summonses, and 911 calls over a defined period of time (e.g., the previous six months or year) to identify the proportion of people who would be considered high utilizers based on your definition. For example, you may decide to focus on the top 500 or the top quartile of people who have the most police contact during the time period; and

  - next, examining data from other systems (particularly homelessness services and health care) to better understand the needs of this population and how frequently they engage with other systems.

STEP 3 — Establish clear policies and procedures for encounters

- Ensure policies and procedures are clearly written and articulate the roles and responsibilities of officers and partners to effectively respond to people who are high utilizers and connect them to appropriate services.

  - They should also outline ways for officers to communicate, and legally share information, with mental health and social service professionals to ensure appropriate and helpful connections to care and provide guidance on what to do during an encounter.

- Provide regular training to officers—particularly officers patrolling neighborhoods with people they repeatedly encounter and officers on response teams (e.g., co-responder teams, homeless outreach teams)—to ensure they are aware of established policies and procedures.

- Ensure officers are aware of prosecution practices in your jurisdiction that may affect the arrest outcomes of people who are high utilizers, such as whether the district attorney is declining to prosecute possession of small amounts of drugs.

5. The Council of State Governments Justice Center, "Sharing Behavioral Health Information within Police-Mental Health Collaborations," csgjusticecenter.org/law-enforcement/information-sharing/.

STEP 2 — Develop alternate response options

- Engage your partners by establishing an interagency workgroup to help leverage additional resources that are not readily available to you, including data, expertise in designing and operating effective health and social service interventions, and additional funding sources to sustain those interventions. These leaders are likely also trying to understand the needs of this population to improve their outcomes and reduce their frequent contacts.

- Engage relevant partners to:

  - design and implement response options that can divert these individuals away from arrest and ensure follow-up care coordination and connection to community-based supports. These partners should include leaders from the health and social service systems, as well as groups in the community who represent advocates, consumers of mental health services, and their families.

  - build out a strong continuum of services to address the needs of this population, improve their wellbeing, and reduce the likelihood of future repeat encounters with your officers. For example, many of these individuals may be having repeated encounters while in the midst of a mental health crisis. Therefore, the community may benefit from a crisis stabilization unit (CSU) where officers take people in lieu of arrest. Creating this CSU would require leadership from the local health care agency to design and operate the facility and coordinate drop off/exchanges.

Response options to consider implementing include:

Crisis Response Services: Police-mental health collaboration response teams (e.g., co-responder teams, crisis intervention teams, mobile crisis teams, and case management teams); pre-arrest diversion programs (e.g., LEAD); crisis stabilization units; and homeless outreach teams

Community-Based Services: Supportive housing; care coordination (e.g., Assertive Community Treatment [ACT], Forensic Assertive Community Treatment [FACT]); substance use services including Medication Assisted Therapy (MAT)

STEP 4 — Review performance regularly

- Track data on the outcomes of your alternate response options to make continuous improvements in those programs and determine whether they are successful. While it may take time to demonstrate results, tracking data over time helps you see your real-time progress and makes it easier to identify where improvements and adjustments are needed.

  - These data can help build the case for sustained funding and support for response options that are successful in reducing repeat encounters and associated costs.

Key metrics to track include trends over time in:

- Total number of people who frequently encounter law enforcement
- Location of contacts with this population
- Demographics of this population
- Outcomes of those contacts (e.g., arrest, hospital, diverted to services)
- Total number of contacts with this population
- Frequency of use of force during encounters