



Coordinating Safety: Building and Sustaining Offices of Violence Prevention and Neighborhood Safety

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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November 2023

Introduction

Communities across the country have been harmed by violence for decades, and government leaders have struggled to deliver impactful solutions, meaningfully invest in non-punitive responses, and produce the safety that communities need and deserve. Community organizers who are working to create safety and address violence—including community violence, family and intimate partner violence, and gun violence—have long recognized that a different approach is needed. Their advocacy and work show us that the most effective solutions to violence come from a deep understanding of a community’s needs, use data to guide strategies, and prioritize prevention and intervention rather than punishment.

One innovative way for governments to incorporate these community-centered tenets into policy and practice—and to provide better, more sustainable support to community-based efforts—is by building centralized local offices of violence prevention or neighborhood safety (OVP/ONS) to serve as the hub of a city or county’s public safety ecosystem. These offices can leverage government infrastructure and resources to support, coordinate, and enhance promising community-based

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approaches. When they are effectively resourced and given significant political authority, they have the potential to transform governmental approaches to public safety.

OVP/ONS are an exciting and increasingly common policy approach. More than half of the 48 city- or county-level offices currently operating were established after 2020, and at least 10 more are in the works. However, as relatively new government structures designed to address complex issues, OVP/ONS are vulnerable to inconsistent political support and resourcing.

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), in partnership with the National Offices of Violence Prevention Network and the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, conducted a one-year research project to examine the promise and vision of these offices. This brief summarizes Vera's recommendations for how to build and sustain an effective OVP/ONS.

WHAT ARE OFFICES OF VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY (OVP/ONS)?

OVP/ONS are local city- or county-level government offices or departments that enhance community safety using supportive approaches that decenter law enforcement as the primary response to violence.¹

Most OVP/ONS frame their mission in terms of community violence intervention (CVI) and prevention. In addition to gun violence, some offices focus explicitly on other forms of violence—such as domestic/intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and gender-based violence. Some offices are housed within or collaborate with departments that have a broad focus on expanding civilian-led programs and strategies for community safety, such as 911-dispatched civilian first response programs.

OVP/ONS support and strengthen the CVI ecosystem through a combination of the following activities:

- › coordinating government and community stakeholders,
- › developing and implementing comprehensive violence prevention and intervention plans, and
- › coordinating evaluation of community-centered safety efforts.

Some offices house CVI programs and staff within the office, some contract with and fund community-based organizations (CBOs), and some do both. In many cities and counties, CBOs have been doing CVI work for years. OVP/ONS can enhance the impact of this work through funding, coordination, and capacity-building.

Data and Methods

To understand the national landscape of OVP/ONS and identify promising practices, Vera set out to learn from the people closest to the work. From September 2022 to July 2023, Vera facilitated focus groups and interviews with a total of 44 local office leadership and staff, former office leadership, local community advocates, program leadership and staff, and national training and technical assistance providers. Vera supplemented this work with desk research, looking at a variety of office-related materials.

Vera developed findings and recommendations through iterative phases of data collection and analysis and by sharing preliminary findings with all participants for their feedback.

See Vera's full report, available at www.vera.org/publications/coordinating-safety.

How can Government and Community Leaders Support these Offices?

HOW TO SET UP OFFICES FOR SUCCESS

To set up an office for success, Vera recommends that policymakers, funders, local government leaders, community leaders, and OVP/ONS directors support the following:

1. Engage with government and community leaders at all stages of office development and operation.

To establish an effective OVP/ONS, people championing the office within government must ensure there is robust planning that engages government stakeholders and lifts up the expertise of community stakeholders, including people directly impacted by community violence. This must happen in the build-up to establishing an office and as a regular part of ongoing strategy development once the office is operational. Inclusive planning processes can build political support, community buy-in, and engagement among key stakeholders and leaders that can set up the office for success and sustainability.

OVP/ONS should engage with government and community leaders at all stages of planning and delivery—for example, in defining the office’s mission and in creating and implementing their strategic plans. Such processes can maximize the likelihood that the mandate and strategies of an OVP/ONS are grounded in the local jurisdiction’s context and the needs of its residents.

2. Clearly define the office’s mission and scope.

Most OVP/ONS have a clear mission and scope: to support and coordinate the CVI ecosystem. In some offices, this includes a mandate to expand civilian-led programs and strategies, such as 911-dispatched civilian response programs.

Government and community stakeholders and office leadership must have a shared understanding of the mission and scope of an office and its “theory of change”—a vision for how the office’s activities will lead to impact. This clarity ensures there is a shared understanding of the types of effects an office is expected to have and the timeline they are expected to happen in. It also provides a foundation to determine the office’s resource, staffing, and coordination needs.

3. Grant the office significant executive and political authority.

OVP/ONS must have significant executive and political authority within government to effectively deliver on their missions. The authority and scope of several OVP/ONS has been reduced during

political transitions, and those that report through a mayor's or city or county manager's office may be especially vulnerable. The reporting structure of an OVP/ONS should be established in a way that anticipates political transitions and ensures the office's sustainability within local government.

Granting the OVP/ONS significant authority will allow them to coordinate and convene other government agencies, implement strategies and programs, hold other city agencies and programs accountable for meeting their commitments, and ultimately deliver on their missions.

4. Provide adequate resources and staffing.

Most existing offices are funded through a mix of city general funds, grants, and federal funds (including one-time American Rescue Plan Act funds). However, many offices are not provided with adequate resources to carry out their missions. In many cities, the budget of a local OVP/ONS equals less than 5 percent of the budget allocated to the local police department, and many offices are not provided with adequate staffing, operational resources, or infrastructure.² Smaller offices (such as Mecklenburg County, North Carolina) have annual budgets in the \$200,000 to \$400,000 range, while larger offices (such as New York City) have annual budgets ranging from \$2 million to \$75 million.³

Office leaders should identify the staff roles that are needed in-house to deliver on the office's mission and scope, including administrative, grantmaking, community engagement, programmatic, and data management functions. Office leaders should ensure these staffing and resource needs are clearly communicated to government stakeholders so that the budgeting and staffing needed are anticipated and do not require ongoing and ad hoc advocacy.

HOW OFFICES CAN COORDINATE SAFETY

Vera recommends that, to increase efficacy and sustainability, OVP/ONS should do the following:

1. Lead inter-agency coordination and encourage a “whole-of-government” approach.

Building a comprehensive public safety ecosystem requires the input and engagement of a range of government and institutional partners beyond those traditionally associated with public safety. OVP/ONS should lead a “whole-of-government” approach to engage and coordinate a wide range of departments and agencies, such as schools, youth and family services, public health, workforce and economic development, and public works.

2. Coordinate comprehensive and data-informed planning and implementation.

Communities need comprehensive strategic plans to guide and sustain their violence prevention and intervention initiatives. OVP/ONS are uniquely situated to support a data-informed strategic planning process—convening government and community partners.

Strategic plans should be informed by an assessment of risk factors and causes of violence, as well as mapping community assets, resources, and solutions. The plans should be co-developed and co-owned by a range of government and community partners. Having many contributors and accountable stakeholders can help sustain the plan's implementation, including through political shifts.

3. Fund and support community-based organizations (CBOs) and community-led efforts in equitable and strategic ways.

Many offices contract with and fund CBOs that operate violence prevention and intervention programs. Offices should target this funding to support the communities that are most impacted by violence and to support grassroots work that is embedded and considered credible in those neighborhoods.

OVP/ONS can also help build the organizational capacity of CBOs to support the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based approaches. In addition to funding, offices can provide training and support related to financial management, program evaluation, and communications.

4. Regularly convene and coordinate government and community partners.

OVP/ONS should convene and coordinate government and community partners to enhance the collective impact of violence prevention and intervention strategies and programs.

Effective coordination is a crucial component of OVP/ONS operations for many reasons. Notably, it can increase collaboration, reduce silos, and clarify roles and divisions of responsibility among programs and partners within the public safety ecosystem. It can also be used to create a shared understanding of the strategic goals of each intervention and how the interventions reinforce each other.

Coordination should facilitate the sharing of data, information, and experiences of organizational partners and community members closest to the issues. Doing so can inform strategy and operations and identify needs and opportunities.

HOW OFFICES SHOULD MEASURE AND MESSAGE SUCCESS

Defining, tracking, and communicating about success is essential for OVP/ONS efficacy and sustainability.

Vera recommends that OVP/ONS take the following steps:

1. Work with stakeholders to define how they will measure success.

At an early stage of office planning, OVP/ONS should establish clear and reasonable expectations about short-term and long-term success with community and government stakeholders. These expectations should flow from the office's theory of change and account for the long-term investment required to permanently reduce violence. Office leaders should also ensure they are in alignment with other government and community partners on how best to communicate expectations and success during political milestones, such as government administration transitions or high-profile incidents of violence.

2. Track data and build capacity for communitywide planning, reporting, and evaluation.

Many communities lack the resources and capacity required to track data for program planning, reporting, and impact evaluation. To meet this need, tracking data and building data capacity should be a core OVP/ONS function.

OVP/ONS can:

- › track data on the shorter-term processes and activities that contribute to longer-term outcomes (such as negotiating ceasefires and mediations or connecting individuals to social services);
- › measure coordination and collaboration across government and community partners (for example, by tracking referrals and follow-ups across different programs and services or tracking the number and type of agencies from different sectors represented in inter-agency working groups); and
- › strengthen inter-agency and cross-sector data sharing (for example, by facilitating data-sharing agreements and developing data dashboards).

OVP/ONS should also track the types of data and measures of success that are meaningful to community and government stakeholders.

3. Regularly share data and proactively inform messaging around violence, prevention, and intervention.

Given the highly politicized nature of community violence issues, OVP/ONS should support strategic and proactive messaging to inform the public about violence prevention and intervention efforts and help relevant stakeholders and the broader public understand the activities, programs, and expected timelines for impact. OVP/ONS should communicate data in ways that are useful to government stakeholders, CBOs, and the broader public.

To strengthen their data sharing efforts for strategic messaging and program operations, OVP/ONS can:

- › amplify the voices of survivors and people most directly affected by violence,
- › provide context about the root causes of violence,
- › share information on the most effective solutions to violence, and
- › regularly and widely share data and information about the implementation of local efforts.

Learn More

To learn more about OVP/ONS and how they can redefine our approach to public safety, see Vera's full report, *Coordinating Safety: Building and Sustaining Offices of Violence Prevention and Neighborhood Safety*, available at: <https://www.vera.org/publications/coordinating-safety>.

For more information about the National Offices of Violence Prevention Network and communities with participating offices, see: <https://ovpnetwork.org>

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Although not the focus of this brief, there are also state-level offices of violence prevention—as well as state-level agencies across health departments, attorney general’s offices, and others—that provide funding, technical assistance, and other support to community violence intervention programs and local OVP/ONS. At the federal level, there is a newly created White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention.
- 2 For OVP/ONS budgets from 2021, see: National OVP Network, *National Offices of Violence Prevention Network Report* (Oakland, CA: National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, 2022), <https://perma.cc/8DSR-N4AJ>; for police department budgets for 72 of the biggest cities across the United States from fiscal year 2020, see Vera, “What Policing Costs,” <https://www.vera.org/publications/what-policing-costs-in-americas-biggest-cities>. Vera researchers calculated comparisons for Baltimore, MD; Chicago; City of Los Angeles; Indianapolis, IN; Louisville, KY; Milwaukee, WI; Minneapolis, MN; New York; Portland, OR; and Washington, DC. For estimated annual budgets needed to implement a comprehensive CVI ecosystem for 50 cities with high homicide rates—including costs for OVP/ONS and CVI staff, wraparound support services, staff training, and data and evaluation—see: The Coalition to Advance Public Safety, “What Is a CVI Ecosystem?” 2023, <https://perma.cc/A5Y7-TLLL>.
- 3 National OVP Network, *National Offices of Violence Prevention Landscape Scan* (Oakland, CA: National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, 2023), <https://perma.cc/ZF94-MTVD>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all the government and community leaders and staff whose experiences, insights, and recommendations informed the development of this project, as well as our project partners and collaborators from the National Offices of Violence Prevention Network and the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform.

This project was supported through funding from The Joyce Foundation, a private, nonpartisan philanthropy that invests in public policies and strategies to advance racial equity and economic mobility.

Cover image: Anti-violence themed mural in Staten Island, NY. Designed by Jodi Dareal, photo by Christine Cruz for ProjectivityGroup.org.