Public Safety Anchor Institution Executive Leadership

CASE EXAMPLES

Public Safety Anchor Institutions in Practice

Like the unique challenges facing cities across the nation, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to establishing a Public Safety Anchor Institution (PSAI). Cities differ in their governance structures, existing public safety infrastructure, community needs, and available resources. PSAIs take different forms across jurisdictions, from coordinating offices within city government to standalone departments. Similarly, the pathways to establishing them can vary significantly. However, what these approaches share is a commitment to building the government capacity necessary to coordinate, implement, and sustain a comprehensive public safety strategy that uniquely fits the various needs of each community.

City executives, such as mayors and city managers, play a critical role in determining how this institutional establishment takes shape. Through executive and convening authorities, they can set citywide priorities; align agencies, goals, and resources; reorganize existing structures; and establish the vocal leadership and accountability needed to establish, promote, and advance implementation and public safety strategy.

The following case studies from Baltimore, Maryland; Durham, North Carolina; and New York City illustrate three effective and tailored approaches. Together, these leaders demonstrate how executive leadership can adopt and adapt the PSAI framework to local circumstances while establishing the foundation for lasting institutional change.

Baltimore, Maryland: Collective Timeline

When Mayor Brandon Scott took office in 2020, Baltimore had experienced seven consecutive years with more than 300 homicides, while previous violence reduction efforts had struggled with inconsistent implementation, limited service capacity, and insufficient infrastructure. Mayor Scott made violence reduction a central priority of his administration and established the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) to coordinate a broader, public health–centered approach to

safety. Rather than relying on a single intervention, Baltimore developed a five-year Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan that brought together government agencies, law enforcement, prosecutors, community organizations, and service providers around a shared strategy.

Importantly, Mayor Scott designated the first year as a "Foundational Year," prioritizing the infrastructure necessary to implement and sustain the strategy. The administration focused on staffing and strengthening MONSE, aligning agencies, building partnerships across government and communities, and evaluating existing programs before expanding interventions. Its collective implementation timeline advanced these efforts concurrently, including strengthening interagency coordination, expanding victim services, piloting new approaches, and establishing mechanisms for evaluation and accountability. This allowed Baltimore to begin delivering services while building the institutional capacity necessary to support them over time.

Mayor Scott's sustained executive leadership provided the political authorization and cross-agency convening authority necessary to align partners around shared priorities and maintain accountability for implementation. The five-year plan established a longer-term framework for coordinating investments, assessing progress, and adapting strategies as community needs evolved. In the first half of 2026, Baltimore recorded 50 homicides, the fewest recorded in the first half of the calendar year since at least the 1960s.

Baltimore's experience demonstrates that comprehensive public safety requires both a shared strategy and a coordinated timeline for implementation. By prioritizing foundational infrastructure, advancing multiple interventions together, and sustaining executive leadership, the city established a framework for strengthening and institutionalizing public safety efforts beyond individual programs.

Key Lesson: A collective implementation timeline—backed by executive leadership and dedicated coordinating infrastructure—can align agencies, build operational capacity, and sustain a comprehensive public safety strategy.

Durham, North Carolina: Reorganize, Strengthen, Redefine

In 2020, at the direction of the city manager, city officials of Durham, North Carolina, partnered with RTI International—a scientific research institute—to analyze nearly 1 million 911 calls, examine use-of-force data, interview first responders, and study alternative response models to better understand which resources could appropriately meet Durham residents' needs. This assessment provided an evidence-based foundation for identifying gaps and opportunities in existing emergency response systems. The findings informed the city manager's decision to establish Durham's Community Safety Department, which became home to the

city's Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Team (HEART) crisis response and other community safety services.

Rather than treating the department's creation as the final step, Durham continued adapting its administrative and operational infrastructure as its services evolved. After being appointed city manager in 2025, Bo Ferguson undertook a broader reorganization of city government, bringing departments and staff that frequently worked together under more closely aligned leadership. Within the public safety portfolio, parks and recreation and economic development were brought alongside police, fire, emergency communications, and community safety. This reflected a broader understanding of the city's functions that contribute to safety and created opportunities for stronger coordination across services without establishing additional standalone institutions.

The city also brought homelessness services into the community safety department, recognizing the overlapping populations and interconnected needs served through HEART, street outreach, and homelessness services. Aligning these functions under shared leadership strengthened opportunities to coordinate service delivery, clarify responsibilities, and connect residents with appropriate resources.

Durham's experience demonstrates how city executives can use their administrative authority to strengthen existing public safety infrastructure. Beginning with a comprehensive assessment of community needs, Durham established a dedicated institution and subsequently reorganized existing government functions to better align with how services operate in practice. Rather than creating entirely new programs or departments to address every challenge, the city illustrates how evidence-based planning, executive leadership, and organizational flexibility can strengthen coordination and allow public safety systems to evolve alongside community needs.

Key Lesson: City executives can use data and administrative authority to establish, reorganize, and strengthen existing government infrastructure, aligning services around shared public safety needs while adapting institutional responsibilities over time.

New York City: Incremental Infrastructure Building

When Mayor Zohran Mamdani took office in January 2026, he brought with him a campaign pledge to establish a cabinet-level Department of Community Safety (DCS) to coordinate a broader, more comprehensive approach to public safety. The proposed department would bring together existing city services and investments in mental health crisis response, gun violence prevention, victim services, and other community-based interventions under a unified strategy.

Recognizing that establishing a new department would require time, resources, and additional institutional development, Mayor Mamdani used

his existing executive authority to begin putting that vision into practice. In March 2026, less than three months after taking office, he signed Executive Order No. 15 establishing the Mayor's Office of Community Safety (OCS) and appointed Renita Francois as New York City's first deputy mayor for community safety. The executive order brought together several existing offices that focused on gun violence prevention, community mental health, hate crimes, domestic and gender-based violence, and crime victim services under a unified governance structure.

Importantly, the executive order went beyond reorganizing reporting relationships. It established specific authorities and responsibilities necessary for OCS to serve as a central coordinator of public safety strategy. These include developing citywide community safety priorities, convening interagency committees, collecting information and data from city agencies, reviewing existing programs, and recommending improvements to their effectiveness. OCS was also authorized to coordinate mental health crisis response programs, including the mental health emergency response team B-HEARD, and review agency budget requests to recommend funding priorities. The order directed city agencies to cooperate with OCS, providing a formal basis for cross-agency coordination and accountability.

The administration has explicitly positioned OCS as an initial step toward establishing a permanent Department of Community Safety. While the office does not yet represent the full institutional structure envisioned during the campaign, its creation demonstrates how cities can begin building capacity while pursuing longer-term organizational and legislative changes. The transition from an executive office to a permanent department will require continued attention to authority, staffing, funding, and institutional responsibilities.

New York City's experience demonstrates that establishing a comprehensive public safety institution does not have to be an all-or-nothing undertaking. Mayors can use existing executive authority to begin translating a broader vision into action by elevating leadership, aligning existing programs, and establishing clear coordination mechanisms. These initial steps can create the foundation for a more permanent institution while allowing the government to refine and expand its capacity over time.

Key Lesson: A comprehensive public safety vision can be implemented incrementally. Executive action can establish leadership, coordinate existing services, and create the governance infrastructure necessary to advance toward a permanent Public Safety Anchor Institution.

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