Public Safety Anchor Institutions Explained: How They Work and Why They're Important

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Real public safety requires changes to government structures and systems.[1] It embraces a public health approach that prioritizes the safety and well-being of individuals and communities.[2] That's why cities and counties across the country are investing in innovative safety services: there are now more than 100 places in the United States with alternative 911 response teams and more than 60 offices of violence prevention or neighborhood safety.[3]

Yet in many places, these essential services exist in a scattered mix of nonprofits and government services. Without coordination, stable funding, and consistent political support, these investments remain less able to reliably meet the needs of the public—including the needs of survivors of violence.[4] Building dedicated government infrastructure and allocating stable resources are essential to sustaining these nascent efforts. Public safety anchor institutions make this possible.

What is a public safety anchor institution?

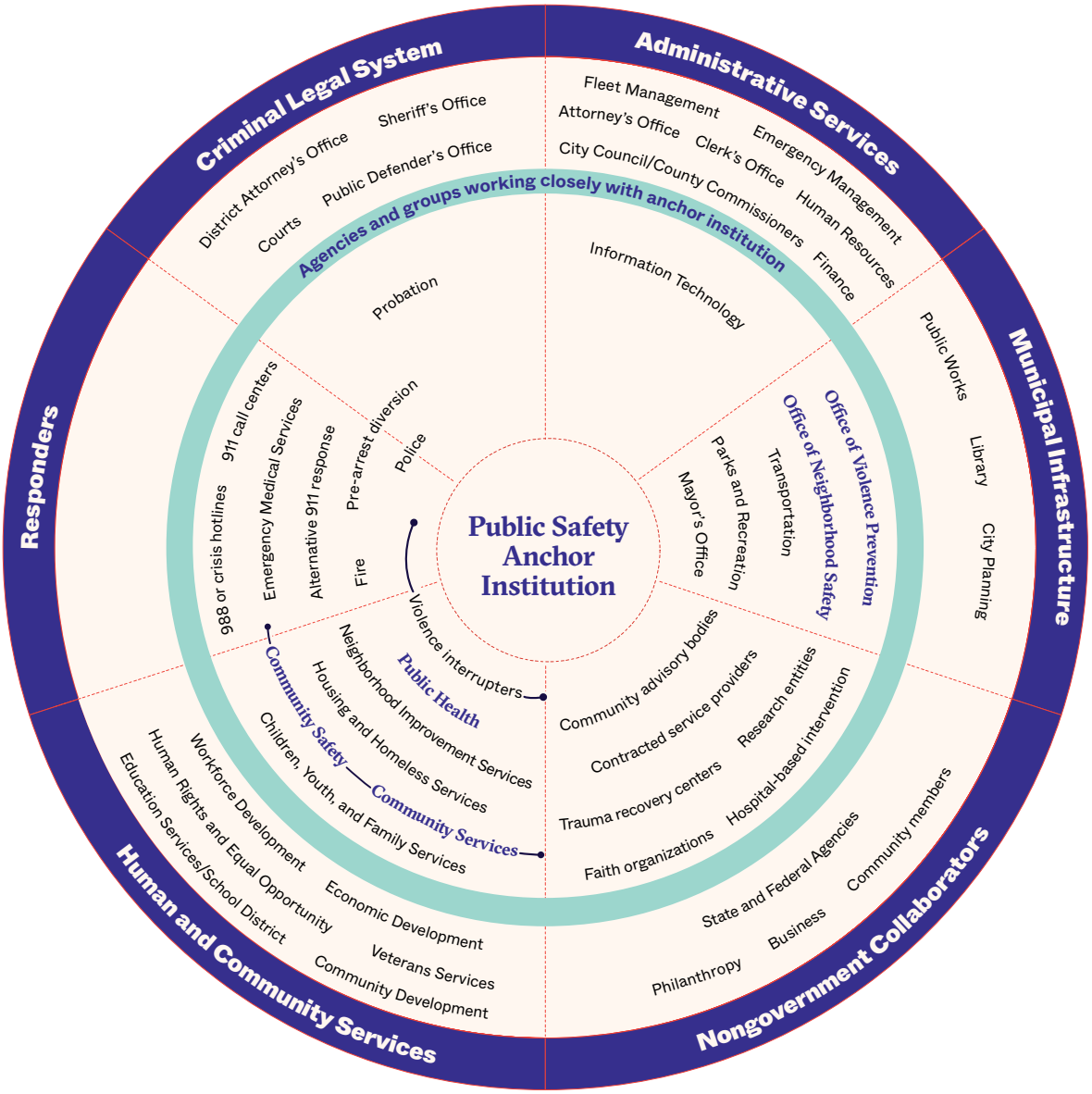
A *public safety anchor institution* (often referred to as a PSAI or anchor institution) is a government agency, department, or office primarily responsible for the development, coordination, and implementation of a jurisdiction's comprehensive public safety strategy. In local government, an anchor institution complements and sits at the same level as traditional public safety institutions like police and fire departments. A PSAI provides strategic leadership and service coordination to help keep communities safe.

Public safety anchor institutions go by different names in different cities. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Durham, North Carolina, the PSAI is called the community safety department. In New Orleans, Louisiana, the health department is a PSAI. In Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Richmond, California, the PSAI is the office of neighborhood safety. Existing government agencies or departments can serve as anchor institutions, although

some jurisdictions may need to create a new department. The PSAI framework is designed to be adaptable at the city, county, and state levels of government.

Figure 1. Public Safety Anchor Institutions and the Local Landscape

A Public Safety Anchor Institution is a government agency, department, or office primarily responsible for the development, coordination, and implementation of a jurisdiction's comprehensive public safety strategy. It is coequal to traditional public safety agencies (for example, police or fire) and adequately resourced and empowered to provide strategic direction and coordination for services and supports that help keep communities safe. An anchor institution directly manages a defined number of non-enforcement-based safety responses and services and prioritizes public engagement and accountability to residents.



FUNCTIONS OF AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION

Data use for efficacy
Anchor institutions establish robust data infrastructure that enables public and cross-agency data sharing to support data-informed decision-making for more effective, holistic public safety strategies.

Building toward sustainability
By developing a clear theory of change, implementing standard operating procedures, securing diversified funding, engaging in field leadership, and conducting regular evaluation and monitoring, anchor institutions can sustain their work through political transitions.

Accountability to impacted communities
Effective anchor institutions prioritize community engagement, representative staffing, and clear mechanisms for community feedback to repair historical harms and ensure those most affected by policies have meaningful input in their development.

Coordination for efficiency
Through shared knowledge of public safety strategies and resources, operational coordination, and collaborative planning and problem-solving, anchor institutions reduce silos and leverage limited resources to create comprehensive safety ecosystems.

What are the core features of a public safety anchor institution?

Though a PSAI's functions vary by jurisdiction, they share similar features. Comprehensive strategies must address both short- and long-term safety. This means places with PSAIs need to develop immediate interventions (carried out by both law enforcement and non–law enforcement personnel) to reduce violence and develop prevention efforts that address the root causes of violence over the long term.

Comprehensive public safety strategies commonly contain the following components:

- **alternative first response services,** which dispatch trained civilian professionals to answer 911 calls involving behavioral health crises and other health and social concerns;[5]
- **violence intervention and prevention,** which can include community violence, intimate partner violence, and other forms of interpersonal violence;[6]
- **support for people returning from incarceration,** spanning transitional and permanent employment, peer support and mentorship, cognitive behavioral therapy, and wraparound services;[7] and
- **services for victims and survivors of crime,** which can include trauma recovery centers and other healing-oriented services.[8]

Instead of using arrests and incarceration as a one-size-fits-all public safety tool, anchor institutions invest in a range of resources. They exist to coordinate and bring what's needed to people and neighborhoods in crisis. PSAIs manage all these tools as part of a single comprehensive public safety plan.

Figure 2. Emerging Public Safety Anchor Institutions

Vera is working with six cities and their emerging public safety anchor institutions to collectively create the PSAI framework.

City	Albuquerque, NM	Saint Paul, MN	Richmond, CA	Newark, NJ	New Orleans, LA	Durham, NC
Agency	Community Safety Department	Office of Neighborhood Safety	Office of Neighborhood Safety	Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery	Health Department	Community Safety Department
Year PSAI established	2020	2022	2007	2020	2022*	2022

*First year of New Orleans's Community Health Improvement Plan.

How do public safety anchor institutions shape effective public safety practices?

PSAIs are central to a whole-of-government approach to public safety. Such an approach treats safety as a shared responsibility and requires active coordination to be effective. Anchor institutions enable this by bringing together multiple agencies to coordinate comprehensive efforts. (See Figure 1.) PSAIs should also prioritize community engagement and create clear community feedback mechanisms. This allows anchor institutions to ensure that safety is sustained, accountable, and rooted in community well-being.

Anchor institutions also enable responsible use of limited resources. PSAIs should align resources (such as personnel, time, and funding) across agencies to reduce silos, increase collaboration, and improve service delivery. To offer real safety solutions, anchor institutions must use data to inform decision-making and help refine public safety strategies based on evidence about their impact. This may require executives and PSAIs to clarify roles, strengthen strategic planning, and standardize and streamline administrative processes (such as reporting requirements, procurement, and data sharing).

Executive and community support in action

Government executives must endorse and champion anchor institutions and move away from relying mainly on law enforcement for public safety services.

> **We must no longer subscribe to the thinking that police alone can stem the tide of violence. While the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) will be part of holding our law enforcement agencies accountable, we must ask what every agency and institution that interacts with our residents can do to stop the violence.**
>
> **—Brandon Scott,**
> **Baltimore mayor**[a]

Anchor institutions must also support and fortify community-based efforts.[b]

> **The Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery (OVPTR) is the community-based arm of public safety. . . . When I say, "community-based," I am talking about a groundswell movement that has been created and cemented through the mayor's direction into an initiative that approaches crime, violence, and trauma as it would be treated in a healthy family—with holistic compassion and support."**
>
> **—Lakeesha Eure,**
> **Deputy mayor of public safety and inaugural OVPTR director,**
> **City of Newark**[c]

Notes:

a. Brandon M. Scott, Baltimore City Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan: Effective July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2026 (Baltimore: City of Baltimore, 2021), https://perma.cc/4NHS-5H92.

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c. City of Newark, "Mayor Baraka Unveiled Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery Strategic Plan as Part of National Crime Victims' Rights Week," press release (Newark: City of Newark, April 26, 2023), https://perma.cc/8TRK-BWYG.

What about law enforcement's role?

Both law enforcement and non–law enforcement safety strategies should be part of a comprehensive plan to advance public safety. These approaches can be coordinated while also protecting each one's integrity and unique contributions.

As part of a whole-of-government approach to public safety, police retain some exclusive responsibilities (such as investigating and solving crimes), share other responsibilities (such as intervening in violence or other incidents that infringe on people's safety), and forgo participation in other activities (such as certain 911 calls). Police participation in a comprehensive plan involves engaging in ongoing collaborative problem-solving and sharing data and information with other government and community partners.

Police departments and comprehensive safety in practice

Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Newark, New Jersey, present two examples of how police departments contribute to comprehensive strategies:

- In 2024, the Saint Paul Police Department created a nonfatal shooting unit. Prior to the unit's creation, though the homicide solve—or clearance—rate was 80 to 90 percent, the rate for nonfatal shootings was about 30 percent.[a] Using one-time state funding, the city set up a dedicated unit that prioritized finding evidence regardless of survivors' willingness to participate in the criminal justice process, a shift in investigative practice.[b] By the end of 2024, the clearance rate jumped to 70 percent.[c]
- Newark Police share data on a monthly basis with the Newark Public Safety Collaborative (NPSC), which is housed within Rutgers University. NPSC convenes monthly meetings for community members to understand police data and identify solutions to a range of issues including gun violence, auto theft, and robberies.[d] Newark's Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery then coordinates the mobilization of community resources and government services.

Notes:

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b. Clay Masters and Gretchen Brown, "St. Paul Solved More Crimes, Had Drastically Fewer Homicides in 2025," MPR News, October 10, 2025, https://www.mprnews.org/story/2025/10/10/st-paul-solved-more-crimes-had-drastically-fewer-homicides-in-2025.

c. Jennifer Hoff, "St. Paul Leading in Solving Non-Fatal Shooting Cases, New Data Shows," KARE11, April 8, 2025, https://perma.cc/HSL8-YG7V.

d. Newark Public Safety Collaborative, "About," https://newarkcollaborative.org.

What's next?

Every place deserves to have a road map to sustain community-centered safety solutions. To accomplish this, Vera is collaboratively developing and synthesizing the institutional infrastructure, policies, and processes needed to create and sustain public safety anchor institutions.

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ENDNOTES

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