The Community Safety Revolution

WHY CITIES NEED A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO PUBLIC SAFETY AND NEED TO BUILD THE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUSTAIN IT

Public Safety Requires a Modern Approach

Keeping communities safe is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of government. Yet the challenges affecting public safety are complex and interconnected, extending beyond what any single agency or intervention can address. Violence, behavioral health crises, housing and economic insecurity, and other community needs often require multidisciplinary approaches. This requires a public safety system that can respond to immediate emergencies while also addressing the conditions that contribute to the revolving door of harm and instability.

For decades, local governments have largely organized public safety around traditional law enforcement and emergency response institutions. Police officers and firefighters remain essential, but they cannot and should not be expected to address every challenge that affects public safety and stability.

The community safety revolution is about expanding our understanding of public safety and building a government system capable of delivering it.

One model for achieving this is a **Public Safety Anchor Institution (PSAI)**—a government agency, department, or office responsible for developing, coordinating, and implementing a jurisdiction's comprehensive public safety strategy. A PSAI complements traditional public safety institutions, such as police and fire departments, by providing dedicated leadership for the broader network of services that contribute to community safety. PSAIs can help governments align policy, funding, training, and operations; coordinate agencies and community partners; and establish the structures necessary to sustain effective approaches over time.

What Does a Comprehensive Approach to Public Safety Look Like?

A comprehensive approach recognizes public safety as a shared responsibility across government and community partners. Rather than relying on individual agencies or programs to address challenges independently, it brings together the full range of

services, resources, and expertise that contribute to safety, such as traditional law enforcement and emergency response teams alongside mental and behavioral health treatment, housing, youth services, violence prevention, and other community-based services. A comprehensive public safety strategy can include:

- **Alternative first response**: Deploying trained professionals to respond to 911 calls involving behavioral health crises and other health and social concerns, ensuring that residents receive appropriate assistance.
- **Community violence intervention and prevention**: Supporting community-based strategies to prevent and interrupt violence, including community violence, intimate partner violence, and other forms of interpersonal harm.
- **Reentry services**: Connecting people returning from incarceration with employment, mentorship, behavioral health services, housing access, and other resources that support successful reintegration.
- **Victim and survivor services**: Providing trauma recovery, healing-oriented services, and other assistance to individuals and communities affected by crime.

These approaches expand the tools available to cities, allowing public safety systems to become more responsive to different situations and community needs. However, **a comprehensive public safety strategy is not simply a collection of programs.** It requires a whole-of-government approach in which departments and community partners work toward shared goals, coordinate services, and align their investments and operations.

Why Promising Programs Are Not Enough

The expansion of innovative public safety approaches represents meaningful progress, but individual initiatives alone cannot deliver lasting transformation.

In many cities, services remain dispersed across agencies, nonprofit organizations, and separate funding streams, often operating under different priorities and administrative structures. Without dedicated coordination and executive leadership, cities can struggle to align resources, address service gaps, and ensure that programs work toward common outcomes. Even effective approaches may face barriers to expansion when they lack the staffing, funding, or cross-agency cooperation necessary to operate at scale.

These challenges also threaten sustainability. Many initiatives begin as pilots, grant-funded programs, or priorities championed by individual leaders. Changes in administration, shifting budget priorities, and expiring grants can jeopardize progress, leaving cities to rebuild efforts that have already demonstrated promise.

Lasting progress requires **mayors and executive leaders to establish the authority, accountability, and institutional capacity** needed to support effective approaches, learn from implementation, adapt to changing needs, and integrate successful strategies into the ongoing operations of government.

Sustaining the Community Safety Revolution

Building a comprehensive public safety system requires a commitment to how services are governed, funded, coordinated, and evaluated. Mayors and city executives play a crucial role in setting citywide priorities, bringing agencies together, directing resources, and establishing accountability across government. Meaningful community participation must also be embedded in decision-making to ensure that public safety strategies reflect residents' experiences.

Sustaining this approach does not necessarily require creating entirely new programs or departments. Cities can build on existing investments, strengthen coordination, and reorganize responsibilities to make better use of available infrastructure. **Mayors and city executives must also work with city councils to institutionalize these efforts through legislative and budgetary commitments.** Ordinances that establish clear responsibilities and authority, alongside dedicated, recurring funding for essential services and operations, can help sustain public safety investments beyond individual administrations and shifting political priorities.

By embedding these functions within government, **backed by sustained executive leadership, legislative support, and dedicated funding,** cities can move beyond isolated pilots and administration-specific initiatives toward a public safety system that continuously learns, improves, and evolves.

Building a Public Safety System That Lasts

The community safety revolution presents an opportunity to redefine not only the services cities provide, but also how the government takes responsibility for keeping people safe. The goal of a PSAI is to strengthen the overall public safety system by ensuring that cities have the tools, expertise, and capacity to address the full range of challenges affecting their communities.

The success of the community safety revolution will ultimately depend not only on the innovative approaches cities introduce, but on their ability to make those approaches an enduring part of how government delivers public safety.

To learn more about Public Safety Anchor Institutions and how local governments can build comprehensive public safety systems, explore Vera's Redefining Public Safety initiative.

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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. For more information about this toolkit, contact Hans Menos, director, Redefining Public Safety, at hmenos@vera.org.