

2023 CAPS Commission Alternative Public Safety Report Frequently Asked Questions

Passed: September 20, 2023

Before using the FAQ, you may want to:

Read about the [CAPS Commission](#).

Read the [2023 CAPS Alternative Public Safety Report](#).

Research & Evidence

Q: Is there any quantitative or qualitative data to back up your findings and recommendations in the Report?

A: Yes! In fact, the Alternative Public Safety Report is entirely evidence-based, which means that every statement made the Report is backed up with either quantitative and/or qualitative research from public health and safety data, local community leaders, scholarly articles, books or important stakeholders on safety in Bloomington. We also documented our mission, goals, founding principles, the problem-solving/ innovation process that we followed, and the evidence-based approach we took to decide controversial but important questions, such as who is “marginalized” regarding public safety in Bloomington. We further encourage you to check out the many citations and appendix of the Report for further information on the research and community outreach that was conducted in creating this Report.

Problems & Solutions

Q: Why does Bloomington need to change the way it approaches public safety? Isn't our current approach working?

A: No, our current approach to public safety does not work, either from a crime-based, justice-based or cost-based perspective. The Bloomington Police Department has seen a 50%

increase in its budget over the four years from 2019-2023, and in that same time, violent crime went up 24%, and other crimes and calls for service stayed around the same levels. Our lengthy outreach with key stakeholders in all existing City departments related to public safety found that the City is functionally unable to respond in a coordinated and strategic way to address the top three most widely acknowledged threats to public safety in Bloomington, which are rising or persistent rates of homelessness, drug use and mental illness. The main reason for this is that there is an institutional gap around the city-wide coordination of important safety-related resources and services: In other words, everyone agrees these problems must be addressed strategically, but no existing departments believe it is within their departmental purview to lead that effort.

At the same time, safety-marginalized residents experience injustice at the hands of our current approach to public safety in several ways. First, their safety needs are discounted or neglected altogether, compared to the safety needs of less marginalized city residents. For example, when law enforcement officers remove the tents and belongings of unhoused residents from public parks to make more room for housed residents to enjoy the parks, their basic safety needs are being actively harmed. When calls for help regarding drug overdoses are responded to by sworn officers rather than simply medical and harm reduction experts, drug users are at risk of being criminalized and incarcerated. When non-violent calls for help regarding experiences of mental illness are responded to with armed officers, they risk being physically harmed or killed by police, rather than having their basic safety needs met.

In addition to this, the current safety system operating in such a way makes emergency services functionally inaccessible to these at-risk populations, due to the high risk to their own safety if they do call 911. Many of the marginalized residents we spoke with in our outreach (whose testimony is in the Appendix of the Report) said they never call 911 for these reasons. To put it more bluntly, a public safety system in which the most marginalized, vulnerable and least safe residents are functionally deprived of access to emergency services is not a functional or working system.

Q: Does the feasibility report recommendation presuppose that a new Department of Community Safety & Resilience is necessary to resolve these structural problems? Has the CAPS Commission already decided this department is necessary or would be beneficial to Bloomington?

A: No. The CAPS Commission has not presupposed a DCSR is necessary or beneficial to the community. The Report represents the CAPS Commission's quantitative and qualitative research and community outreach to conduct the initial investigation (due diligence) into might be stopping these problems from being strategically addressed in our city. Our findings led the Commission to recommend a feasibility study as the next step of our investigation to assess the likely economic, organizational and legal impacts of a DCSR on the community.

In other words, the Report has caused the CAPS Commission to raise the question of whether a DCSR should be created, and we recommend the city fund a feasibility study to gather all the

relevant evidence that will equip our community to answer the question of whether a DCSR would be beneficial for our city. The recommendation of a DCSR is a provisional recommendation that is fully contingent upon the results of a feasibility study to assess the likely impact of such a new department on the city.

Q: Isn't it inefficient to create a new city department? Can't the existing departments simply be improved? Is the CAPS Commission concerned at all about efficiency of our public safety operations?

A: It depends, no and yes. Efficient operations do not depend on the overall number of departments, but on how well they function together as a system to address the problems that our city faces. The current public safety system is not functioning in a way that allows it to address the greatest emerging threats to public safety, as the Report identified. Therefore, the current law-enforcement-led public safety system is neither efficient nor functional.

In addition, questions of efficiency tend to revolve around whether a system makes the best use of available resources. Our Report found that the city has spent 8 million of dollars on the current public safety system in the last 4 years to increase the police budget, yet this system is structurally unable to strategically address the top emerging public safety threats. If crime, violence, and the public health and safety indicators that have been scientifically proven to increase crime and violence, like economic inequality, housing insecurity, mental illness and drug use, all keep rising, while the current public safety agencies do not even have a strategic plan to address these emerging threats to public safety in an evidence-based way, then this is not an efficient use of resources.

As the Report notes many times and as we have detailed in this FAQ, taking a community safety-based approach of providing for the basic safety needs of the least safe members of society is an evidence-based approach for reducing crime and violence. On the other hand, increasing police budgets as an approach to reducing crime and violence has not been statistically shown to be effective anywhere, according to scholars of policing such as Alex Vitale that our Report has cited. Putting more money into a model of improving safety through law enforcement that has already been proven not to work is not efficient.

Trying to reform or improve departments that are designed to fulfill other goals (such as law enforcement or economic development) that explicitly conflict with human safety in the hope that this will solve the problems has also been proven not to work in other communities. This is because the problem is structurally rooted, and thus it cannot be solved without fundamentally changing the decision-making processes of how the city views and responds to growing threats to public safety. All scientific evidence the CAPS Commission has seen points to the conclusion that the only efficient way to reduce crime and violence is to take a community-based approach to safety.

That is why CAPS has recommended that the city take the next steps to research the likely impact of intentionally designing a new department that has the organizational authority, city

resources and institutional goal of using evidence-based practices to strategically reduce these threats to safety as the most efficient path to improving safety in our community. We have asked for the city to fund a feasibility study to provide the community with all the relevant information to make that final decision, as well as to advise on how this might be achieved in the most cost-efficient and organizationally efficient manner. For example, the recommendation explicitly calls for the feasibility study to advise on which existing city services might be moved into the new department to eliminate organizational redundancies.

Cost-wise, a community-safety based approach is likely to be many times more cost-efficient than the existing law enforcement-led approach. US cities with existing community safety programs have seen long-term costs savings of their program that more than pay for the additional upfront cost having to create a new department to lead such an approach. See the next FAQ for more information.

Q: Has a safety-based approach to crisis response and community safety ever successfully reduced crime, injustice and costs in other US cities?

A: Yes, our Commission performed in-depth case studies on best practices of community policing and non-traditional approaches to public safety around the US, including in Denver, CO, Eugene, OR, Northampton, MA, Durham, NC and Ithaca, NY. All have experienced levels of success that warrant the continuation or expansion of their alternative public safety programs. More specifically,

1. The CAHOOTS alternative policing program in Eugene, Oregon was reported in 2020 to save the city \$22.5 million per year in public safety, ambulance trips and ER costs.
2. A study in 2022 found that the alternative policing program in Denver has reduced low-level crime by one-third and that their community responders cost around 25% of the cost of law enforcement officers.
3. Finally, a study described in a 2017 NYT article found that public spending on expanding access to drug treatment saves communities on both healthcare and reductions in spending on crime and public safety, which are up to 3 times the cost of the drug treatment programs.

Q: How can our community be more confident of the economic costs and benefits before making the decision to create a new Department of Community Safety & Resilience (DCSR)?

A: While the Alternative Public Safety Report contains convincing evidence that taking a community safety-focused approach to public safety will reduce overall spending while improving economic prosperity for the City of Bloomington, the CAPS Commission has asked the City to fund a feasibility study to be carried out in 2024 that will utilize actual city spending data in various areas to create an economic assessment of a DCSR.

This will allow our entire community to have access to full evidence of the likely economic impact of a DCSR before deciding whether to create one. The feasibility study will also serve as a mechanism to allow other community organizations to collaborate with CAPS in designing a DCSR that will improve the economic resilience of our city by ensuring that the basic safety needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized residents of Bloomington are met even in the face of sudden safety threats, such as economic, environmental or other crises.

Q: How does the Alternative Public Safety Report relate to sustainability and environmental health?

A: It is well-documented by psychological and behavioral economic research that people value environmental health and sustainability goals more when they feel secure and when their basic needs are met. Conversely, humans naturally care less about protecting the environment when that goal is perceived to be in direct conflict with their own survival needs. Inequality increases status competition, consumerism and materialism, while people living in more equal societies value greater environmental protections.

For example, in Bloomington most unhoused residents make their non-traditional living areas near or in sensitive habitats for other living creatures, like near creeks, or in city parks. This is due to the fact that both people and other complex living organisms, including plants and animals, all need similar things to survive: clean running water, shade from trees, relative quiet and safety from car traffic are just a few of the resources that people and other living creatures all depend on for life in our city. When our society deprives unhoused people of basic safety needs, such as housing, residents are forced into choosing between harming these sensitive habitats by living in them and creating pollution, or to risk their own physical or mental health by living in less environmentally sensitive, but also less habitable areas. Rather than expecting unhoused residents to choose whether to value environmental and biodiversity health over their own health and survival, the recommendations in our Report suggest that our City should focus on providing the basic safety needs of all residents in order to prevent two of the most preventable kinds of environmental harm in Bloomington: habitat pollution caused by non-traditional living areas and discarded needles due to untreated drug use.

Furthermore, our recommendations for a DCSR include the explicit focus on actively mitigating the ongoing harm that these problems are causing both people and the environment by taking immediate steps to provide basic hygiene and sanitation services to unhoused residents, and by carrying out regular clean-up of nontraditional living areas and of discarded drug needles.

Q: Why does the DCSR include “resilience” in the name, and what does the CAPS Commission mean by that term?

A: Safety is a short-term concept in that one can be safe from immediate physical or mental harm one minute and unsafe the next. Resilience is more of a long-term view, in that must be built up over many years in a strategic and evidence-based way. Safety threats usually come from within a community, while threats to resilience tend to be weather-related, economic or

public health crises that originate outside of the community. A community is safe when its members are all protected from immediate physical or mental harm. A community is resilient when it is prepared to withstand all of the most likely predicted crises that may befall it. Cities who prioritize resilience can get through a sudden economic downturn, severe weather events, climate-related emergencies or pandemics with very little upset to their overall levels of safety, prosperity and health.

Because crises can come from many different fields, system resilience is an interdisciplinary concept that is studied in fields that combine economics, human behavior, environmental science and public safety information into models that can help cities become more resilient in the face of sudden catastrophic events. For this reason, the CAPS Commission invites organizations, boards and commissions related to all of these areas of study to help design the feasibility study and the future DCSR to ensure that it can both protect our city's short-term safety interests and its more long-term resilience interests.

Operations & Logistics

Q: Would there be a separate phone number for community members to call besides 911 to ensure they would get a community responder instead of a law enforcement officer?

A: Yes, but our work has not uncovered any existing alternative crisis response system that can make 100% guarantee that a call made to an alternate, community-response line will not be diverted to police or other law enforcement officers. This is due to the need to ensure that a sworn officer response can be provided when necessary due to an existing safety risk. The alternative crisis response program in Denver, Colorado has only needed to send sworn officers to respond to calls for alternative responders in less than 1% of calls for alternative responders made over three years of their operations.

More importantly, our work has uncovered an urgent need for Bloomington to have an alternate, non-police-led crisis response system, including dispatch protocols that are determined according to safety needs, rather than the needs of law enforcement, which frequently conflict with safety. This is why we have recommended the creation of a DCSR which will prioritize community safety in all its operations. An important role of the DCSR is to collaborate with other crisis response agencies (including existing agencies like police and fire) to re-design dispatch protocols in a way that optimizes for community safety.

Q: What if a community responder encounters a dangerous or violent situation that requires an armed officer response?

A: Any community responding teams managed by a DCSR would have the ability and training to call in sworn, armed law enforcement officers when necessary. Existing community response programs in other US cities all have this same safety feature, and Denver's STAR program has only needed to send in sworn, armed officers to less than 1% of calls diverted to community

responders in three years of operations. For example, if a non-violent situation escalates into a dangerous one, or if someone calls an alternative crisis line asking for community responders, but reports the use of dangerous weapons at the scene, are two examples of when sworn, armed officers may be sent to respond to calls that are intended for community responders.

Q: Which calls would go to which responding departments under the new system, and who would decide?

A: Existing dispatch protocols have been designed mostly by law enforcement agencies for the purposes of furthering the goals of law enforcement. The CAPS Commission wants dispatch protocols to be re-designed by the DCSR in collaboration with all existing crisis response agencies in ways that optimize the goal of safety first, and the goals of law enforcement second. We do not feel it is the role of the Commission to decide exactly how this will work, but we think it's important that a department like a DCSR that prioritizes human safety in all its decisions have the overall say in deciding dispatch protocols rather than simply law enforcement agencies.

For example, Durham, NC has 4 community crisis response teams, including one made up completely of mental health clinicians that help design dispatch protocols, and are embedded within dispatch, so that calls for service can be directed by qualified mental health experts, as well as having situations de-escalated by licensed experts before crisis responders arrive on the scene. Under the Commission's recommendation in the Report, the details of a community safety-based approach to crisis dispatch would be decided by a DCSR in a collaborative relationship with existing public safety agencies.

Q: Are there some services that are currently carried out by other city departments that may be appropriate to move into the new Department of Community Safety & Resilience (DCSR)?

A: Yes, we expect that there are. For instance, the existing non-coercive, community safety and health-based response services provided by the existing police and fire departments might be better operated in a DCSR. Furthermore, other services currently carried out by parks, housing and neighborhood development, and community and family resources might also be better provided by a department whose overall goal is community safety, or at the very least, in close collaboration with such a department.

Feasibility Study

Q: What is a feasibility study, and why did the Commission recommend one in the Alternative Public Safety Report? How was the cost calculated? When will it take place? Who will carry out the study, and who decides the qualifications of the firm that is chosen?

A: The feasibility study requested by the CAPS Commission in the Alternative Public Safety Report is an assessment on the likely economic, organizational and legal impact of a DCSR on the city and community. It will be carried out by a qualified independent firm or non-profit entity who will be selected by an Advisory Council created by the CAPS Commission for the purpose of designing an RFP (Request for proposals), which is similar to a job application for consulting firms who carry out studies such as this for government entities. CAPS Commission hopes to recruit members of other commissions/boards and community organizations familiar with community safety for the Advisory Council to ensure that the decision is made in a way that reflects the perceived safety needs of our community, especially the safety needs of marginalized residents.

The likely cost of \$40,000 - \$65,000 was calculated based on studying several existing organizational feasibility studies that were carried out in the last three years by Novak consulting which cost between \$20,000-\$54,000 each. The CAPS Commission took the highest amount paid for one departmental assessment (\$54,000) and suggested a range near the higher end of this amount due to the fact that our requested study would be more community-led and evidence-based than those studies, and thus would likely require more work to go into making it.

Outreach & Collaboration

Q: Why is the CAPS Commission doing outreach with other commissions/boards and community organizations about its Alternative Public Safety Report?

A: Because we know that our Commission does not have all the expertise or experiences needed to design a department that can protect the safety and resilience needs of the city. Our research and outreach reflected in the Report has taught us that a community safety program must be community-led. We are specifically inviting other organizations to join CAPS Commission in designing a request for proposals, selecting a qualified firm and designing a future DCSR that can protect the most vital safety needs of all residents.

We have also asked some community members and organizations to join our call for the City of Bloomington to take a new approach to safety that includes the safety needs of all people by taking the first step of funding our request for a feasibility study costing \$40,000 - \$65,000 to be included in the 2024 city budget.

Q: What is the CAPS Commission asking from individual community members who want to support the work of the CAPS Commission to make Bloomington a safer community for all of its residents?

A: Individual residents of Bloomington can join our work by visiting one of our meetings and speaking during public comment, joining our Commission as a member, or volunteering to help our Commission gather community input on this important work. See our [website](#) for more information on how to get involved.