Harris County Launches Two New Programs to Reduce Crime and Make Our Communities Safer

Everyone in Harris County deserves to be safe and live without fear. That’s why Harris County is launching two proven smart on crime initiatives that will help make all our communities safer:

- **A gun violence prevention program** that will reduce shootings and stop the spread of further violence by interrupting ongoing conflicts. Cities and counties across the world have developed violence interruption programs like the one proposed in Harris County. Impacts include:
  - 63% decrease in shootings and 30% reduction in gun injuries in South Bronx
  - 30% reduction in shootings in Philadelphia over two years
  - 70% reduction in likelihood of arrest following a violent injury hospitalization in Oakland
  - 0% re-injury rate in an Indianapolis hospital-based program
  - 50% reduction in gunshot wounds and killings from 2007 to 2019 in Richmond, California.
  - In June 2021, the South Baltimore area (where the violence intervention program Safe Streets Baltimore operates) marked a full year without any homicides.

- **A targeted first responder program** that will allow peace officers to focus on solving crimes and use trained health professionals to respond to 911 calls related to homelessness, behavioral health, substance use or non-emergency health or social welfare issues (an estimated 21%-38% of 911 calls).

  For example, if you call 911 about an intruder in your home, we’re going to send a peace officer, just as always. If you call 911 about a person on the street corner who is suffering a mental health crisis, we’re going to send a mental health professional.

These programs are endorsed by Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez and are grounded in years of data, experience and science. They will be led by a new Division of Community Health and Violence Prevention Services within Harris County Public Health (HCPH). Funding for these programs will come from Harris County’s general fund.

For too long, we’ve unfairly placed our peace officers in untenable positions that require the unique skills and training of a mental health expert or a social worker. HART and the Gun Violence Interrupter program will use trained professionals to intervene in situations to prevent violence and get help for people experiencing a crisis. They have my full support.

– Sheriff Ed Gonzalez
Gun Violence Interruption Program

The Harris County Gun Violence Interruption Program is a community-based solution to reduce gun violence using public health initiatives that operates outside and complementary to law enforcement. The program works on an individual and population-level to prevent gun violence before it occurs and stops the spread of further violence by interrupting ongoing conflicts.

Gun violence is a serious threat to the health, safety and well-being of communities in the United States. Every year, 39,000 Americans die from gun violence — an average of 100 per day. In Texas, gun crimes claim the lives of 3,139 Texans each year and wound even more.

The Harris County Violence Interruption Program incorporates the most effective strategies from research-backed initiatives across the country:

1. **Identify gun violence hot spots**

2. **Interrupt Violence through Credible Messengers**
   - Community-based outreach
   - Hospital-based intervention

3. **Address Root Causes via Coordinated Care Teams**

4. **Ongoing Community-wide engagement**

- **Identify individuals & locations that are most impacted by violence**: Through a combination of agency-level data, healthcare system data, community context, and social networks, staff identify where in community to concentrate resources, and identify who could benefit most from programming, including hospital patients who are victims of serious violent injuries.

- **Interrupt violence through credible messengers**: Credible messengers, individuals with similar lived experience to program participants, are the key to success of both street outreach and hospital-based engagement strategies. These roles are critical to building trust and reaching the most vulnerable and least connected to institutions and resources.
  - **Community-based Outreach**: Credible messengers trained in mediation techniques intervene before situations escalate to a loss of life or violent injury, and provide a pathway for individuals to connect to the help they need to address drivers of violence involvement.
  - **Hospital-based Intervention**: As the most common destination for victims of serious violence, emergency rooms and trauma centers serve as key resources in efforts to break cycles of violence. Engagement immediately following a violent injury provides a critical window to address the root causes of violence involvement, as upwards of 50% of violent injury victims are re-victimized within 5 years. Credible messengers meet victims, their families, and close social networks at bedside to assess and intervene in the event of retaliatory activity. Messengers understand the underlying needs of survivors and their families and connect them to coordinated care teams to attend to medical and social needs beyond discharge.

- **Address root causes through Coordinated Care Teams**: Akin to triage teams in medicine, coordinated care teams represent caseworkers from a variety of disciplines that interact and coordinate efforts to analyze, prioritize, and create a plan to simultaneously address multiple risk factors and develop a strategy for individuals to heal. The team sees clients several times a week, assisting with their needs, and connecting them with social services such as mental health counseling, drug treatment, employment, leaving gangs.

- **Ongoing Communitywide Outreach**: Staff develop public education campaigns, post-shooting vigils, and other public demonstrations and community-building activities to promote neighborhood cohesion. They work with respected local voices to proactively communicate clear messages about alternatives to violence and gun use.
Assistance Response Teams

The Holistic Assistance Response Teams (HART) is a new Harris County program created to directly dispatch 911 and other calls to interdisciplinary first responder teams, trained in behavioral health and on-scene medical assistance. The Holistic Assistance Response Team (HART) program will provide the most effective community safety response to issues related to homelessness, behavioral health, substance use and non-emergency health or social welfare crises.

This program aims to help improve community health and safety, save law enforcement time and resources, and help to reduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

Health, housing, and poverty are problems beyond law enforcement control, yet law enforcement is the default first responder. This means officers are forced to spend a considerable portion of their time and resources responding to 911 calls related to mental and behavioral health, homelessness, drug use, or various other issues related to quality-of-life. An estimated 21-38% of police calls for service could be effectively handled by community responders instead. This would free up officer time for public safety emergencies that require a law enforcement response.

- Denver’s STAR team — composed of a licensed social worker and paramedic—was able to resolve calls on average six minutes faster than law enforcement, and 34% of their calls originated with law enforcement who showed up at a scene and asked STAR to take over.
- Eugene, Oregon’s CAHOOTS program responded to 24,000 calls in 2019 alone, freeing up police officer time for public safety emergencies.

Connecting people with health-based services they need as quickly as possible makes communities safer. In America today, jails are the largest mental health providers in most communities. More than three quarters of people detained at the Harris County Jail have a mental health indicator and almost one tenth are experiencing homelessness. Responses diverting people experiencing homelessness, substance use and other behavioral health issues from the criminal legal system and focusing on treatment and meeting basic needs are effective in improving public safety overall. For example:

- At Harris County’s Mental Health Jail Diversion Center, those diverted with 5-plus bookings were 2.9 times less likely to be booked again than people who were not diverted, and those diverted with no previous bookings were 44.9 times less likely to be booked. For every $1 spent on diversion, the county avoided spending $5.54 on criminal justice costs.
- In Santa Fe, N.M., participants in the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program had fewer arrests post-referral and no arrests for violent offenses in a three-year study period. In Seattle, after three years of operation, LEAD participants were found 58% less likely to be arrested after enrollment in the program compared to a control group that went through the normal criminal justice system processing.
- In Suffolk County, Mass., diverting people arrested for low-level, nonviolent misdemeanors (such as drug possession, shoplifting or motor vehicle offenses) were 58% less likely to commit another crime in Suffolk County in the following two years.
- Permanent supportive housing has been shown to decrease arrests and jail stays. In New York City, supportive housing participants had 40% percent fewer days in jail (almost 20 fewer days), on average, than members of a comparison group. In Seattle, a study found an average reduction in jail admissions from three per person pre-housing to one per person post-housing and an average decrease in jail days from 31 days per person pre-housing to 18 days per person post-housing.

Over relying on law enforcement to intervene in minor incidents is particularly damaging for communities of color. Calls for service related to minor incidents are more likely to result in justice system involvement for Black people, who are disproportionately arrested for low-level and noncriminal infractions such as loitering, disorderly conduct, and drug possession. For example, according to data collected from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, in 2020 Black Texans were incarcerated for cocaine possession at 16 times the rate of white residents, even though usage rates are the same across racial and ethnic groups. The consequences of these enforcement actions can last a lifetime for individuals, their families, and their communities, since even a minor arrest record can create permanent barriers to housing, education, and employment.
**Holistic Assistance Response Teams (HART)** will address these issues by directly dispatching 911 and other calls to interdisciplinary first responder teams, trained in behavioral health and on-scene medical assistance. 9-1-1 dispatchers will identify non-violent, non-emergency calls appropriate for a HART response and send teams to the scene; other first responders (EMS, law enforcement, and Fire Departments) can also call on HART directly. HART responders will use their behavioral and medical health training to resolve calls on site and to connect residents to follow-up resources to promote ongoing health and safety.

HART will ultimately serve as a fourth branch of the Harris County’s first responder system, beginning in a concentrated geographic area and eventually expanding countywide. HART will make Harris County safer and healthier by providing the appropriate response to each call and freeing up Fire, EMS and Law Enforcement resources to attend to life saving and crime-related calls for help.

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**Adding New Tools to Keep Our Communities Safe**

Harris County Commissioners’ Court is committed to advancing innovative and effective approaches to improving the health and safety of all communities in Harris County that complement existing strategies.

Health-based approaches help address root causes and advance preventive efforts to ensure our communities are as safe and healthy as possible. **Investing in prevention** reduces residents’ involvement in the criminal justice system and research indicates that public health-based violence interventions and civilian responder programs can measurably reduce criminal justice, behavioral health, and medical costs—while improving public safety.

Harris County will launch its interdisciplinary initiatives in a new **Division of Community Health and Violence Prevention Services** within the Public Health Department (HCPH), which will house additional programs in the future.

Harris County joins a growing number of cities and counties across the country moving forward with innovative strategies to use trained health-focused professionals to improve community safety. These agencies collaborate with other departments and serve as hubs for holistic public safety solutions. Because the focus of public health is on the health, safety and well-being of entire populations, Harris County Public Health is the logical ideal entity to house the Division of Community Health and Violence Prevention Services.
Investing in preventative, early interventions makes communities healthier and safer than overreliance on the criminal legal system. By creating these health-based programs, Harris County joins cities nationwide like Baltimore, Milwaukee, Denver, Eugene, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Oakland, New York City, Portland, Rochester, and San Francisco, among others.

### Example Health-Based Approaches

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<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Results (Not Exhaustive)</th>
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| Chicago          | Cure Violence                                | • Shooting declines ranged from 16% - 28% in various areas  
                   |                                               | • Hot spots became cooler by 15% - 40%,  
                   |                                               | • Gang involvement in homicides and reciprocal killings decreased |
| Baltimore        | Safe Streets Baltimore                       | • In June 2021, the South Baltimore area (where the violence intervention program Safe Streets Baltimore operates) marked a full year without any homicides. |
| New York City    | Crisis Management System                      | • Participants in credible messenger/case worker program less likely to use violence to settle disputes  
                   |                                               | • Shootings in the area where the program operates decreased by 20% in one year.                                                                 |
| Oakland          | Caught in the Crossfire                      | • 70% less likely to be arrested, 60% less likely to have any criminal involvement than a comparison group                                             |
| Massachusetts    | Safe & Successful Youth Initiative           | • Participating youth 42% less likely to be incarcerated than other youth with similar backgrounds  
                   |                                               | • 35% reduction in violence  
                   |                                               | • 984 fewer victims in the state  
                   |                                               | • Prevented more than $15 million in costs due to violent crime victimization. |
| Indianapolis     | Project Prescription for Hope (RxH)          | • One-year re-injury rate of 0% for program participants, compared to 8.7% for a historical control group                                                |
| Denver           | Support Team Assisted Response (STAR)        | • In the first six months of the program, STAR resolved a total of 748 incidents that involved no force, arrests, or jail.  
                   |                                               | • Average resolution time 6 minutes shorter than police.                                                                                     |
| Seattle          | Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD)    | • Participants 58% less likely to be arrested after enrollment in the program compared to a control group that went through the normal criminal justice system processing. |