



SHAPING CRISIS RESPONSE: SPOTLIGHTING DURHAM COUNTY, N.C.



Durham County, N.C.
County Seat: Durham
Population: 324,833

The National Association of Counties (NACo), in collaboration with [The Pew Charitable Trusts](#) and [RAND](#), hosted a series of conversations with county leaders to understand the progress, challenges and lessons learned from 911/988 interoperability across various models, including embedded clinicians, call transfer and co-located response. This series will spotlight the work of five of the innovative counties shaping crisis response systems.

Durham County leverages a strategic partnership with the City of Durham to create a community-driven vision for public safety and crisis response. In 2019, Durham County and the City of Durham formed an inter-governmental planning committee to solicit feedback from the community and develop key recommendations. Across several assessments, there was an overarching desire for an alternative public safety department to address behavioral health concerns. In response, the county-city planning committee recommended the establishment of the Community Safety Department (DCSD) to create unarmed, equitable and community-centered responses.

In 2022, DCSD launched its flagship [Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Team \(HEART\)](#) program with four crisis response units spanning the continuum of behavioral health care.

- When someone calls 911, HEART's Crisis Call Diversion (CCD) unit is available to assist with mental health clinicians who are embedded within Durham's 911 call center.
- If necessary, the Community Response Teams comprised of mental health clinicians, peer support specialists and Emergency Medical Technicians are dispatched.
- Alternatively, if there is a greater safety risk,

the Co-Response unit, including a licensed clinician and Crisis Intervention trained police officer, intervenes.

- Finally, HEARTS's Care Navigation unit follows up with community-based care options.

Within HEART's first year, its CCD unit responded to nearly 2,500 calls transferred from 911 dispatchers, providing follow-up care to 53 percent of callers and diverting 30 percent of callers from unnecessary in-person responses.

Durham County's commitment to reducing the number of people with mental illnesses in jail began and has persisted since 2015 when it joined the [Stepping Up Initiative](#). Since then, the Durham County Justice Services Department has invested in various long-term supportive services, including substance use treatment, reentry services, food and housing services, employment readiness and cognitive behavioral intervention. This provided the foundation for the Durham County Justice Services Department to work with the HEART

program to develop a process for diversion, aftercare and follow-up care. Overall, these thoughtful partnerships are pivotal to delivering a holistic approach to behavioral health care.



NACo would like to thank Leigh Mazur and John Zimmerman, Durham Community Safety Department, Roshanna Parker, Director of Justice Services Department and Resource Center, and Captain Helen Tripp, MIH program manager of Durham County Community Paramedics for sharing information on Durham County. This spotlight was created with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts.