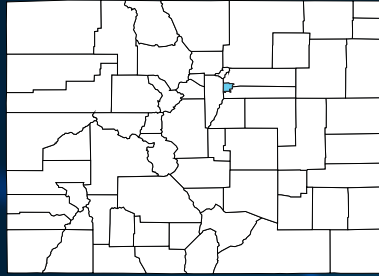


## DENVER CITY AND COUNTY, COLORADO

POPULATION:  
**716,492**



## BACKGROUND

In 2016, the City and County of Denver (Denver) launched a novel approach to 911 emergency response. By embedding licensed clinicians with police officers, their co-responder program seeks to improve 911 response for individuals experiencing behavioral health crises. Since its inception, the co-responder program has grown from four clinicians to 32 (soon to be 42 with an overnight shift) and connected countless people with behavioral health treatment and services as an alternative to arrest. In November 2018, voters overwhelmingly passed the [Caring for Denver ballot initiative](#) which created a 0.25 percent sales tax increase for mental health and substance abuse services. This tax has generated roughly \$35 million annually with at least 10 percent of those funds allocated to specific public safety services and training related to mental health and substance abuse. Leveraging this momentum, in June 2019, a team of individuals from the city and local non-profit organizations participated in a three-day experiential learning session with [Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets \(CAHOOTS\)](#) in Eugene, Ore. With the Denver Police Department reporting mental health-related calls up 17 percent over the previous three-year average heading into 2020, the time was ripe to expand the work of the co-responder program and develop a Case Manager Hub in the Denver Police Department.

## SUPPORT TEAM ASSISTED RESPONSE (STAR) PROGRAM

Launched on June 1, 2020, the Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) program is the result of a partnership between the Caring for Denver Foundation, Denver Police Department, Mental Health Center of Denver (MHCD), Denver Health Paramedic Division, Denver 911 and community supports and resources. Prior to implementation of STAR, the more than one million 911 calls for service each year were routed to either police or emergency departments. STAR created a third option into the service connection system.

With STAR, civilian health care workers respond to calls for service involving individuals experiencing problems related to homelessness, mental health, depression, poverty and/or substance abuse. Clinicians with the STAR Program are trained in de-escalation techniques; provide food, water and transportation for clients and connect people to shelters, counseling, medication and other essential services.

**The STAR program creates a social crisis response to the 911 system in lieu of traditional law enforcement.**

Program developers reviewed available 911 and Police Department data to determine which call types were most appropriate for the program and when and where to pilot the effort. For the first six months of the program, the STAR van (pictured below) – outfitted with the ability to assess and triage minor medical issues – was staffed Monday to Friday from 10am to 6pm and served a select area of downtown Denver that was identified as having the greatest need. For the pilot, the STAR unit responded only to calls for service coded as assist, intoxicated person, suicidal series, welfare check, indecent exposure, trespass unwanted person and syringe disposal through a partnership with the [Harm Reduction Action Center](#). The Denver 911 call taker made the determination as to where to direct each call. In addition, the STAR unit can be assigned to a call for service by request from an officer on the scene or can initiate a response in the field. Twenty-eight percent of the program's calls for service are from police officers responding to scenes where STAR clinicians can be used.

In January 2020, the STAR program began dispatching social workers from MHCD alongside paramedics to respond to 911 calls where there was no identifiable legal concern presented.

## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

STAR has received praise from the local Denver community for its innovative approach to a public health issue. The program's ability to redirect certain calls away from costly emergency room visits and jails has led to increased efficiency while allowing traditional public safety and medical services to prioritize calls that require their specific training and experience. **In the first six months of the pilot, STAR personnel responded to 748 calls for service (with an average 5.75 calls per shift) and recorded no arrests. At 11 months of the pilot, the STAR unit had responded to 1,378 calls with no police backup required.** Based on these results, program evaluators estimate STAR could reduce overall Denver Police calls for service by 2.8 percent if brought to scale.\* To ensure the continued success of STAR, the City and County of Denver identified \$1.4 million in the general fund to support the program in 2021. The hope is to expand the program to full coverage of the community, particularly those areas with the most need, and to outfit future STAR vans for wheelchair accessibility.



NACo would like to thank Chris Richardson, Associate Director for Criminal Justice Services at Mental Health Center of Denver, for sharing information on the STAR program. Mr. Richardson can be reached at [Chris.Richardson@MHCD.org](mailto:Chris.Richardson@MHCD.org).

This case study was created with support from [Arnold Ventures](#) as part of [Data-Driven Justice](#), a project that aims to support local jurisdictions in using data to better align resources to respond to people who are frequent utilizers of justice, health and human services systems.

\* STAR Program Evaluation (January 8, 2021), [https://wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/STAR\\_Pilot\\_6\\_Month\\_Evaluation\\_FINAL-REPORT.pdf](https://wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/STAR_Pilot_6_Month_Evaluation_FINAL-REPORT.pdf)