

Creating and Sustaining Internal Buy-in for Pre-Arrest Diversion Programs

A Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies



As law enforcement agencies across the nation implement alternatives to arrest programs, whether through diversion or deflection, establishing internal support is critical to program vitality and sustainability. Through various training opportunities, the use of internal data analysis and sharing, along with strong communication, agencies can expect to see increased officer referrals and program success.



Find the Champions

Identify a handful of officers (preferably from various shifts) that have received training on your pre-arrest diversion program, made a few referrals, and/or are typically the go-to people on shifts for problem-solving or just “being in the know.” These officers most likely have a reputation for being well-versed on the diversion program and will encourage referrals from other officers, when appropriate. Examples are the Crisis Intervention trained officers or the Field Training Officers on shift who typically have increased training in this area. Field Training Officers are a critical target population for buy-in due to their influence on new recruits and younger officers.



Provide Training for New Recruits

The police academy is an excellent opportunity to provide training on your diversion program as a strategy (a tool) officers can hit the streets with. This will create a generation of new officers already versed on the program, which can be especially helpful if training opportunities for existing officers is limited. If your agency does not have its own “in-house academy,” consider sending officers trained on your diversion program to local community colleges to speak to their cadets. These will likely be the officers your agency hires and the sooner they are familiar with your diversion program, the more likely they will be to use it.



Provide Field Training Component

Make training on your diversion program a required element of an officer’s field training time. Officers can benefit from seeing the referral process in practice and it provides an opportunity for questions. Additionally, this practice can fill the gap in providing agency-wide training due to capacity issues. Consider adding a category for a diversion referral to your checklist for officers in field training.



Provide Refresher Training

Prior to starting your program and periodically thereafter, continue to find opportunities to train officers. Shift change and roll call meetings can be helpful once you have a larger segment of officers who have received the formal training. This presents an excellent time for program partners, such as peer support, to introduce themselves to the officers creating a sense of teamwork. Do not use the same officers or command staff personnel to teach every in-service training on your diversion initiative. Increased officer buy-in may be easier to obtain by using officers who have made referrals but are not part of the “diversion management team.” These officers can communicate to their peers about how making a referral was beneficial to them, such as taking less time than the traditional arrest process or providing another option to an offender who really needed help and not jail.



Utilize Officer Activity Reports

Most agencies rely on some form of data collection of officer activity which can drive performance. Using your current process for tracking and reporting on officer activities, add a tracking field for the number of referrals an officer made in a specified time. This data collection can help keep the option of program referrals on the minds of officers and their supervisors, as long as it does not create an environment in which referrals are simply made for data collection purposes.



Insert “Number of Pre-Arrest Diversion Program Referrals” into CompStat Report

Similar to Refresher Training described above, this is an opportunity to query command staff and shift supervisors whether arrests or other calls for service could have resulted in a diversion referral. This can be particularly helpful in areas in which drug-related crimes are prevalent. A high level of command staff commitment to the diversion program will drive agency-wide commitment.



Communicate with Officers About the Program

Program Managers: Keeping in mind the sheer volume of information officers must keep up with pertaining to people, places, and laws, communicating about the program is critical. Program materials (brochures, policies, visor cards, hand-out cards) serve as reminders of the program as well as fact-finding for officers not yet trained in the program.

Command Staff Level: Communication from the command level about the program sets the stage for overall agency buy-in. Programs that are not widely discussed tend to be forgotten as resources.

Program Staff: Officers desire feedback on their efforts to connect people to programs and resources. Consider sending a simple email thanking them for the referral, sending an email providing them a basic participant update, or inviting them to the next team meeting can all be helpful.



Utilize Your Social Media

Community buy-in is as important as officer buy-in. Sharing how your program operates, what it entails, and program successes and needs can encourage more referrals. This could be person-initiated referrals who walk into the police department to request resources, or family members who want to connect a loved one.



Engage with Narc-Vice Personnel

Detectives assigned to Vice and Narcotics are accustomed to non-traditional law enforcement practices. These personnel will find value in the ability to use diversion programs to develop rapport with victims of human trafficking and confidential informants who are struggling or have struggled with substance use. Detectives assigned to these units are typically highly influential in a police agency, and therefore, their buy-in and use of the program will likely generate agency-wide support for diversion initiatives.



Engage Your Crime Analysts

Analysts can be powerhouses of data crunching and programs can benefit from their review of property crimes, pawn records, overdose incidents, and drug arrests. These data points can help identify people with a substance use disorder who are also justice involved or at risk for adverse outcomes. Create a pathway of communication for the analyst to share these possible program referrals to a trained officer.



Consider Other Referral Intercepts

There are multiple ways in which officers may meet people who would benefit from the program. Many officers do not want to wait until there is a pending criminal offense in which to make a referral to services. Referrals can come from responding to overdose incidents (when appropriate), from local public health/harm reduction agency staff, mobile crisis staff, and jail releases. Consider the value of partnerships with agencies that serve people looking for low-barrier access to services; officer buy-in is created when there is a team approach to working with the community.



Community Education

The more your community knows about this program, the more likely both support and referrals will come your way. Starting conversations early, even before program implementation, to community groups can be beneficial to long-term support and program sustainability. This can be in the form of community watch groups, city/county government presentations, and county organization meetings. Community knowledge of the program also benefits officers who are explaining the program to potential participants in the field.

Credits

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