

**A Summary Report of Municipal Responses to Section 18 of Public Act 20-1: An Act Concerning Police Accountability**

**National Association of Social Workers**

**Connecticut Chapter**

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In July, 2020 the Connecticut General Assembly passed legislation that addressed police accountability. Within that legislation was a provision (Section 18) that required all police departments in Connecticut to evaluate the use of social workers and to report findings to the Police Officers Standards and Training Council. Public Act 20-1: An Act Concerning Police Accountability states the following in Section 18:

Not later than six months after the effective date of this section, the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection and each municipal police department shall complete an evaluation of the feasibility and potential impact of the use of social workers by the department for the purpose of remotely responding to calls for assistance, responding in person to such calls or accompanying a police officer on calls where the experience and training of a social worker could provide assistance. Such evaluation shall consider whether responses to certain calls and community interactions could be managed entirely by a social worker or benefit from the assistance of a social worker. Municipal police departments shall additionally consider whether the municipality that the police department serves would benefit from employing, contracting with or otherwise engaging social workers to assist the municipal police department. Municipal police departments may consider the use of mobile crisis teams or implementing a regional approach with other municipalities as part of any process to engage or further engage social workers to assist municipal police departments. The Commissioner of Emergency Services and Public Protection and each municipal police department shall submit such evaluation immediately upon completion to the Police Officer Standards and Training Council established under section 7- 294b of the general statutes.

NASW/CT received and reviewed 42 municipal reports, perhaps not all of the filings but clearly a large enough selection for the purposes of this document. Overall, the responses recognized the value of social work intervention within police work, even amongst municipalities that at this time are not seeking to employ or contract with social workers.

General Comments

The concept of social workers and police working collaboratively is not a new idea. For decades police officers have accompanied social workers in certain child welfare visits and officers have coordinated with social service agencies on individuals and families where officers have been called in response to a non-criminal situation. Police departments are frequently called upon to deal with non-criminal matters that arise from social problems. In these situations, officers are being asked to respond to issues that are complex and best served by an integration of the expertise and skills of police and social workers. A police officer and social worker response best benefits the residents being served, and allows the officers a team approach to problem solving. As a former police officer from Stamford, CT told NASW/CT, having an officer respond to a call that they are not able to act upon due to a lack of time, professional resources and scope of practice creates in the community’s perception that the police are not caring and are not helpful. This former officer commented that being able to give a warm handover to a social worker who can provide necessary help will build in the public’s mind a positive perception of the police department.

The reports primarily focus on police calls in relation to behavioral health issues. This is entirely appropriate as behavioral health professionals are best suited to address a person with a mental health situation. A professional social worker might address the presenting issues in a fashion that may avoid an involuntary commitment and trip to the nearest emergency room. But spotlighting behavioral health leaves out a much broader range of ways that social workers can assist police departments. It is clear from the reports that were reviewed that a wide range of issues for which police are called in can best be handled by a police social worker. The type of situations mentioned by various municipalities included: substance use, homelessness, landlord/renter’s disputes, juvenile problems, truancy, homebound seniors in need of services, civil disputes, runaways, and medical assistance. Police social workers may conduct follow-up after a police call, connect residents to community services, do periodic check-ins on high end users, and case management. The consultation between social workers and police officers on the scene or after a call can benefit the team and others involved in understanding the social dynamics of a situation. Anecdotally, we have consistently heard stories of officers who initially were leery of having a social worker with them becoming the greatest supporters of police social workers. A police social worker in Bridgeport reported that the officers vie for who gets to have her ride with them.

A significant number of the towns reported utilization of Crisis Intervention Teams for mental health calls. Many of the reports cited one or two concerns; the availability of CITs may not be sufficient for a timely response (especially in more rural regions of the state) and a lack of in-person availability 24/7. Some police departments noted that crisis intervention teams were most effective at the time of crisis but the system is not designed for adequate follow-up services.

Another finding from the reports is the frequent reliance by police departments on local community based mental health agencies, social service organizations and town social service departments for consultation, direct intervention and follow up on behavioral health calls. However, some small towns where there are insufficient community resources indicated they would support a regional police social worker program that shared social workers to work with their police officers.

Models of Police Social Work as Reported by Police Departments

The reports can be broken down into six models of utilization of social workers by police departments in relation to police calls for service. These are general model categories as many towns reported the use of social workers that fit into more than one of the models. All of the models have in common the teaming of social workers with police officers to enhance the community services already being provided by police departments.

**Embedded Police Social Workers**: This model directly employs social workers within a police department. This includes police officers and social workers teamed together to respond to calls, the social worker being brought in after a call to work with and follow up on cases and in some communities the social worker independently responding to calls. Branford and Bridgeport are amongst the municipalities using this model.

**Contracted Services:** This model contracts with a community-based organization that employs social workers who work within the police department. Stamford and Bloomfield are amongst the municipalities using this model. A variation on this model is arrangements with a local community-based organization to be called in on an as needed basis. For example, Torrington has a grant funded agreement with the McCall Foundation to assist with substance use situations.

**Town Department Other Than Police Department:** Under this model a town department dedicates staff time to the police department. The police social worker is a municipal employee, typically within the town’s social service department. Enfield has instituted this model. A variation on this model is police departments that utilize their town social workers on an as needed basis. Redding is a town that uses this model.

**Community Response by a Separate Municipal Agency:** Both New Haven and Hartford are initiating a multi-disciplinary town agency to provide responses to 911 calls in coordination with the police department.

**Social Work Interns:** A new development for Connecticut in the past two years is to have social work students complete their field internship with a police department. Willimantic, Milford and Norwich Police Departments utilize interns from schools of social work.

**211 and DMHAS Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT):** Almost all of the reports mentioned using in-person CIT services for behavioral health police calls or accessing 211 information for virtual assistance.

Officer Wellness

Officer wellness are programs to preserve and promote officers’ physical and emotional health. The fact that officer wellness was not mentioned in the reports comes as no surprise given that Section 18 does not ask for assessment of utilization of social workers for officer wellness. Nonetheless, we include this sectiion in this report because police officers deal with stressful situations constantly. High levels of stress at work can affect their physical and emotional well-being, and have a toll on both their personal and professional lives. Therefore, social workers can be an asset to proactively guide and examine officer wellness programs and to assist police officers in “helping themselves first.” Utilization of police social workers as part of the social worker/police officer team can build a relationship where conversations concerning work and life stresses can be discussed. For a deeper perspective on the advantages of utilization of police social workers in officer wellness see the NASW/CT Testimony on Utilization of Social Workers by Police Departments for Officer Well-Being and Mental Health Examinations submitted to the Governor’s Task Force on Police Accountability and Transparency.

Obstacles to Utilization of Social Workers

The reports consistently raised three concerns as potential obstacles to utilization of social workers: cost, safety, and lack of 24/7 coverage. Each of these points have validity but are not necessarily without answers addressing the concerns being raised. We look at each point below with potential solutions.

**Cost:** Clearly, the most challenging issue is that of cost. Who will pay for police social workers? Salary and benefits for a full-time LCSW embedded within a police department may be up to $100,000. This cost must be measured against the value and assets of such an employee. For example, police departments that have utilized social workers report a reduction in repeat calls from high users of police services, with subsequent cost savings from diminished calls for service. Municipalities will have the advantage of pro-active social work services to address prevailing needs of residents and diminish problems thus reducing future expenditures.

Some of the reports suggest sharing the services of a social worker between multiple municipalities, which is most reasonable for smaller police departments within a region of the state. Some towns have assigned a current social worker employee to devote specific time to the police department, paid thru the town’s social services budget or other non-police municipal department. Social work interns may be another feasible option whereby the police department is not paying for the internship.

It was suggested by some police departments that state and/or federal funds assist the municipality in the use of police social workers. This recommendation was most frequently made by police departments in smaller towns and distressed cities.

**Safety:** The issue of safety was raised in most of the Section 18 reports that NASW/CT reviewed. In some reports this alone was the reason given to dismiss utilization of social workers for police calls. Safety is indeed a primary concern when police officers respond to calls and assuring the safety of a social worker is absolutely necessary. We are not suggesting that a social worker be introduced into a situation where there would be imminent risk of harm. Making sure the scene is safely secured for non-police officers is essential. For all those calls that do not include potential violence a police social worker teamed with a police officer can be both safe and most effective.

Worries about safety of the social worker has been worked out by departments currently utilizing social workers. One option is to have a social worker ride with an officer but not engage in the encounter until it is determined to be safe for the social worker. Another is to have the social worker arrive once the scene is secured and deemed safe. Police departments that utilize social workers have taken into account the steps necessary to minimize risks to the social worker. We recognize the real dangers of police work and applaud the emphasis on safety by police officials, while simultaneously seeing safety issues as a surmountable hurdle by police departments in the utilization of social workers.

**Lack of 24/7 Coverage:** A fair number of reports reviewed by NASW/CT raised the point that police work is 24/7 and police departments cannot commit to social work services on a 24/7 basis, with night and weekend hours the most difficult to secure. Some reports tied this into cost factors, stating that having social worker coverage 24/7 would require multiple social workers, which is unaffordable to the town. This concern can be best described as allowing the perfect to stop the very good from occurring. Few municipal services available to the public are offered 24/7. Emergency services is among the exceptions, however even with emergency services it is common that necessary follow-up awaits regular business hours. There are however police departments that reported a social worker is available at least to consult with an officer 24/7 and on-call arrangements may be built into the position of police social worker. Most importantly is that the services of a social worker be available, preferably for the immediate need. When that is not feasible, having the capability to provide follow-up services by the police social worker enhances the police department’s ability to assist residents.

Summary

The utilization of social workers in response to police calls for behavioral health and social problems is far more widespread than imagined. Overall positive views of utilization of social workers came through in most reports. Police social work is a growing field of professional practice both in Connecticut and nationally. The teaming of social workers with police officers, in those communities that have brought these two professions together consistently report positive outcomes. The report of the East Hartford Police Department perhaps says it best:

“EHPD officers do respond to non-emergency and non-criminal calls for service involving issues related to family problems, mental health, and the elderly. These calls may be reported in as zoning violations, behavioral issues, domestic discourse, and neighbor complaints. Often a percentage of these calls repeat to the same addresses for similar issues. EHPD is likely called in these situations because citizens are unaware of or have no other options. Officer’s respond to ensure there is no danger or crime, and as a matter of public service. Often though, an officer's response to these calls is not ideal or even necessary. Social work professionals would prove most beneficial in these instances. As such a social worker would be responsible for initial/ follow up investigations, referred by the police. (safety concerns should arise, police assistance should be requested).”

Scott M. Sansom, Chief of Police

Recommendations

1. All police departments have access to social workers for response to calls to police for behavioral health calls and social problems. This can be achieved by embedded police social workers, contracted service providers, or Crisis Intervention Teams staffed by social workers.
2. For those municipalities that have populations of 15,000 or more residents, or have a significant volume of behavioral health and social issues related calls for assistance, police social workers should be either employed directly by the police department, be contracted with a community-based services agency, or be part of a separate municipal agency.
3. Police social work services are to be recognized for the full scope of practice that social workers can provide. This includes response to 911 calls, however is much broader to include, but not limited to, community outreach, case follow-up, information and referral, education and training for officers, public education and awareness programs, responding to and addressing social problems that police are called upon, and officer wellness.
4. Increasing the number of clinical social workers in the Crisis Intervention Teams through DMHAS and expand services to statewide coverage.
5. Allocate state funds for municipalities to hire police social workers.
6. State officials shall pursue federal funds for the purpose of hiring police social workers.

**Addendum**

**Municipal Reports Section 18 of the Police Accountability Task Force**

The following is the list of municipalities section 18 reports that were reviewed for this report. Additional municipalities may have filed reports however NASW/CT did not have access to them at the time of writing this report.

Ansonia Redding

Avon Ridgefield

Berlin Rocky Hill

Bethel Simsbury

Bloomfield South Windsor

Branford Torrington

Bridgeport Waterbury

Bristol West Haven

Cheshire Wethersfield

Clinton Willimantic

Coventry Windsor Locks

Cromwell

Danbury

East Hartford

East Lyme

Enfield

Fairfield

Farmington

Glastonbury

Greenwich

Groton Long Point

Hartford

Ledyard

Monroe

New Canaan

New Haven

Old Saybrook

Orange

Plainville

Plymouth