



# Community Care: A Field Education-Based Model For Police Social Work in Rural Communities

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The summer of 2020 was an inflection point for social justice issues in the United States. Widespread protests in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans were held nationwide, and the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and intensified the many symptoms of racial, health, and economic disparities prevalent in our society (Salmond & Dorsen, 2022). Calls to defund and/or reform policing were ubiquitous, and many of these calls proposed the use of social workers in place of some or all police responses (Andrew, 2020; Levin, 2020; Lum et al., 2021). At Western Carolina University (WCU), we began examining the ways in which we were preparing our students for working in this complex area of practice. This process led to the development of the Community Care program, a graduate-level internship embedded in the local police department and supported by faculty from both the Department of Social Work and the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

The mission of the Community Care program is to support the local community by offering voluntary social work services to anyone in need, especially those who are or might become involved with law enforcement. The program has five identified objectives:

1. Expand the law enforcement toolbox by increasing officer response options beyond arrests, citations, and warnings

2. Promote long-term solutions for community members in need through connections with appropriate resources
3. Promote safety of officers and community members through increased opportunities for de-escalation and proactive, precrisis intervention
4. Reduce the risk of trauma to all parties involved in potentially negative interactions between law enforcement and community members
5. Reduce officer workload and streamline officer workflow

While the program is still very new, initial feedback from the community, the police department, and the social work students suggests that these objectives are being met, and all partners involved are experiencing mutual benefit.

### **The Question of Collaboration Between Social Work and Law Enforcement**

Many social workers support defunding or abolishing our current systems of policing, and there are important ethical questions around the role of social workers in systems that perpetuate racism and oppression (Dettlaff, 2022). However, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) supports partnerships that reform existing policing structures, stating that in order to achieve effective reform, “the purview of policing can no longer be all-encompassing – certain functions currently carried out by the police should be assumed by other professionals” (Wilson & Wilson, 2020, p. 1). This approach, characterized by the diversion of cases in which social determinants of health are significant factors, which are sometimes more pressing than associated criminal activity, has informed the development of the Community Care program.

Historically, collaborations between law enforcement and social workers began in the first half of the 20th century, continued to grow in number and public visibility through the 1970s, experienced a dip in popularity and funding during the 1980s and 1990s, and have begun to re-emerge since 2020 (Goble, 2021; Patterson, 2022). In general, these partnerships tend to focus on addressing issues of mental health, substance use, and homelessness in less punitive ways than traditional policing, including precrisis intervention, de-escalation, and providing resources and referrals to community members (Goble, 2021; Patterson, 2022).

### **Existing Models of Collaboration**

In late 2020, we began exploring options for collaboration between the Department of Social Work and the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at WCU. In addition to discussing opportunities for developing collaborative courses and modules for our students, we began considering the possibility of partnering with local law enforcement agencies to develop social work field placements. Our first step in this process was to scan existing models for partnerships between social work and law enforcement, including crisis intervention teams, alternative responder programs, and

embedded police social workers. Each is briefly summarized here.

### **Crisis Intervention Teams**

The Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) model involves training teams of police officers on mental illness, mental health treatment, related legal issues, and de-escalation techniques (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016; Watson & Fulambarker, 2012). CIT is the most popular model of collaboration between police and mental health professionals – it has been adopted by more than 2,700 police departments across the U.S. (Goble, 2021) – and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (2016) has recommended CIT as a preferred practice for improving officer interactions with people living with mental illness. However, evidence on the efficacy of CIT to improve outcomes of interactions with law enforcement for people living with mental illness has thus far been inconclusive (Giwa, 2018; Taheri, 2016).

### **Alternative Responders**

Alternative responder programs allow social workers, paramedics, and other health and mental health professionals to respond, without police presence, to select emergency calls (Goble, 2021). One of the longest-running examples of this is the Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) program, which was launched in 1989 in Eugene, Oregon as a partnership between the city and a federally qualified health center (Wurzburg & Vorpahl, 2022). This program, which operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, mobilizes two-person teams consisting of a medic and a mental health professional to respond to calls involving mental health crises, substance use, and other nonviolent incidents (White Bird Clinic, 2020). However, feasibility and efficacy of alternative responder programs are limited by staffing and funding shortages, and additional investments are needed to ensure that these programs are truly as quickly and continuously available as police emergency response (Goble, 2021; International Association of Chiefs of Police & University of Cincinnati Center for Police Research and Policy, 2021).

### **Embedded Police Social Workers**

A third option for collaboration between social workers and law enforcement is embedding social workers within police departments (Alamo & Ornelas, 2013; Patterson, 2022). Due to the lack of centralized, nationwide data collection, it is difficult to estimate how many police departments currently employ social workers, but many have shared success stories about working with embedded social workers, and many others are considering hiring embedded social workers (Lamin & Teboh, 2016; Patterson, 2022; Stone, 2021). Recent research suggests that when officers and mental health professionals operate as coresponders to emergency calls, with clear delineation

of their roles on the scene and open dialogue, officers benefit by gaining a better understanding of mental health issues, and community members report that these interactions are less stressful and less stigmatizing than a traditional police response (Goble, 2021; Krider et al., 2020; Puntis et al., 2018). Based on our review of the existing models, we determined that the embedded social work model might work best for our community. Although no one in our region currently utilizes this model, it seemed the most realistic to explore given the sizes of our communities and the associated police departments.

### **The Community Care Liaison Program**

WCU is located in Jackson County, North Carolina, one of the seven western-most counties in the state. The nearest incorporated town, Sylva, is home to approximately 2,700 year-round residents, while the campus hosts approximately 8,200 undergraduate and graduate students, approximately 300 of whom are enrolled in the Department of Social Work's BSW and MSW programs. Jackson County, like many rural areas across the U.S., is underserved in terms of both medical and mental health resources (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2020). The Sylva Police Department (Sylva PD) employs 15 sworn police officers. In 2021, in addition to traffic stops and other law enforcement activities, officers responded to 29 drug overdoses and 35 domestic incidents, and conducted 90 health/welfare checks and 55 involuntary commitments (Sylva Police Department, n.d.).

In the spring of 2021, we approached the Sylva PD's chief of police to see if he would be open to partnering on the development of a social work field placement. We knew that the chief had a community-oriented perspective on policing; according to his message on the department's website, he believes that Sylva PD is "truly a community policing agency. While handcuffs and citations have their place in our profession, we believe that policing is a lot more than that alone" (Sylva Police Department, n.d., para. 3). The small size of the department was both a challenge and an opportunity; while it was unlikely that a department of 15 had adequate funding to develop a crisis intervention team or alternative response program, we felt hopeful that if a social work intern could be placed with the Sylva PD, we would be able to assess the potential, buy-in, and outcomes of the partnership relatively quickly.

### **Program Development**

The first social work intern was placed with the Sylva PD in the fall of 2021. Initially, the student focused on program development; he completed a SWOT analysis, talked with officers about their perspectives on working with a social worker, and engaged with organizations in the community to request their input and buy-in. The chief and the student worked together to name the role—Community Care Liaison—and

began to develop processes and procedures for accepting referrals, collaborating with officers, and reaching out to clients to provide resources and support. Because the Sylva PD did not have a social worker onsite to provide supervision, we used existing policies around providing external supervision to field students. A social work faculty member met with the student at least weekly throughout the semester to ensure that his learning goals were met, provide support and guidance, and discuss any ethical challenges that arose.

In October 2021, the chief shared a referral form with Sylva PD's officers. The first weekend it was in use, the officers submitted four referrals for community members they felt might benefit from talking with a social work student (Town of Sylva NC, 2022). In just over a year, three Community Care Liaisons have worked with dozens of additional community members, assisting primarily with mental health concerns, substance-use treatment referrals, and resources for unhoused individuals, and also providing supports related to domestic violence, immigration, and navigation of the criminal justice system (G. Lavere, personal communication, October 26, 2022). While the chief initially envisioned the social work student role as limited to follow-up case management, he soon saw the benefits of allowing the students to serve as corresponders as well, joining officers on the scene when they encounter individuals who might benefit from social work services. At a recent Town Board meeting, he stated, "I did not want corresponding, but what I have learned is that that is where the magic happens...that's definitely the direction we're going" (Town of Sylva NC, 2022, 52:25).

### **Benefits to the Community**

The chief believes that, from its inception, the Community Care program has benefitted community members who interact with law enforcement (C. Hatton, personal communication, November 30, 2022). He shared an anecdote from one of the first Community Care clients: An officer offered to bring an unhoused community member into the police department to talk with the liaison. The individual held out his hands to be handcuffed, stating that he "knew how this worked," but the officer reassured him that he was being brought in voluntarily, just to talk. After meeting with the liaison and being connected with relevant resources, he told the chief, "No one's ever treated me this well in a police department before" (C. Hatton, personal communication, December 9, 2021). More recently, the current liaison shared data collected in the program's first year, citing successful referrals to peer support, housing programs, and mental health services, among other programs. She stated that over half of her more than 25 clients were successfully referred or connected to ongoing services, and that local business owners have voiced strong support for the program as well (Town of Sylva NC, 2022).

## Benefits to Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officers have also benefitted from the Community Care program (C. Hatton, personal communication, November 30, 2022). The chief sees improvements in time and efficiency in his department, and states that his officers appreciate the different skill set the social work students bring to interactions with community members in need. He shared the following:

An officer said, “Is the social worker here? Because I don’t know what to do.” It was a dementia patient situation, and honestly, it wasn’t something that the police could really handle, but nonetheless it was for us to do...we ended up with a good solution for the problem, and [the liaison] was a big part of that. (Town of Sylva NC, 2022, 50:05)

Over time, the chief believes the program will lead to fewer repeat calls, especially those involving unhoused individuals in the community. “This program’s amazing,” he says, “It’s touching real people, it’s not just stories, and it’s definitely helping the efficiency of the police department as well” (Town of Sylva NC, 2022, 58:30).

After a year of working with the social work students, the chief decided that he wanted to get a better sense of the percentage of calls coming in related to social issues. In November 2022, he instituted a system in which officers report, at the end of each shift, how many of their calls included poverty, homelessness, substance use, mental health needs, and other social determinants as underlying factors in the situations that led to police involvement (C. Hatton, personal communication, November 30, 2022).

The officers also have the benefit of talking to the Community Care Liaison about their own responses to stress. “I thought that addressing officer mental health would be a tough nut to crack, because the chief said he didn’t foresee the officers being comfortable talking about their emotions with me,” she stated. Over time, however, she is seeing a shift, as officers begin opening up about their feelings and experiences (G. Lavere, personal communication, November 3, 2022).

## Benefits to Social Work Students

While each student in the Community Care Liaison role has developed an individualized learning contract, all have found it easy to meet the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) nine competencies for social work education (CSWE, 2015). Sample tasks for each competency are shared in Table 1.

**Table 1***Sample Tasks Related to the CSWE Competencies (2015 EPAS) Completed by Community Care Liaisons*

CSWE competency (2015 EPAS)	Sample tasks
Competency 1: Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore alignment and potential tensions between social work ethics and law enforcement practice in supervision</li> <li>• Use person-first and strengths-based language when discussing clients and community members with law enforcement</li> </ul>
Competency 2: Engage diversity and difference in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use self-reflection and supervision to reflect on personal biases and biases observed among law enforcement or other professionals in the community</li> <li>• Observe and assess perceptions of policing and relationships with law enforcement among diverse communities in the area</li> </ul>
Competency 3: Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify structural and social barriers impacting service provision among diverse and vulnerable rural populations</li> <li>• Attend community events that focus on the needs of underserved populations in the area</li> </ul>
Competency 4: Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect and analyze data on effectiveness of referrals made to community agencies</li> <li>• Research effective strategies for responding to community concerns related to unhoused individuals and share findings with chief of police</li> </ul>
Competency 5: Engage in policy practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop internal department policies for effective utilization of the Community Care Liaison role</li> <li>• Advocate for policies that support vulnerable populations in the area within the department and with the Town of Sylva</li> </ul>
Competency 6: Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use motivational interviewing strategies to ascertain client strengths and goals</li> <li>• Build relationships with law enforcement officers, engaging in conversations about the impacts of poverty, mental health, and substance use on criminalized behaviors</li> </ul>
Competency 7: Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a questionnaire to aid in appropriate and effective services for clients referred to the Community Care Liaison</li> <li>• Identify screening instruments that could be used in crisis situations with clients</li> </ul>
Competency 8: Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With client input, complete referrals to community agencies for needed services</li> <li>• Build partnerships with local agencies, convening regular meetings for information-sharing and collaboration</li> </ul>
Competency 9: Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Track outcomes of referrals to the Community Care Liaison and to outside agencies</li> <li>• Survey law enforcement officers at the Sylva PD about their experience working with the Community Care Liaison</li> </ul>

### *Logistics of the Placement Process*

The first Community Care Liaison, in the fall of 2021, was a BSW senior completing a 400-hour, one-semester block placement. While the first student was incredibly successful in this role, conversations among faculty and Sylva PD leadership led to the decision that the role would best be filled by a graduate-level student moving forward.

Two MSW students have filled the role since then, with two graduate assistants playing supporting roles in data collection and related research.

Since the Sylva PD does not currently employ a social worker, faculty provide supplemental supervision to the student in this placement, working with department leadership to share feedback, develop individualized learning contracts, and complete relevant evaluations, in line with departmental policies and the 2015 CSWE EPAS (CSWE, 2015). Because this placement requires a significant amount of independence, well-developed critical thinking skills, and a willingness to “make the road by walking,” we intentionally seek out students who have a high level of maturity and feel comfortable with some ambiguity. The unique nature of this placement is discussed with the students in advance; students who feel they would be a good fit are recommended to the chief. After in-person interviews are conducted, the director of field education and chief discuss the students’ goodness of fit and confirm the placement.

### *The Student Experience*

Students in the role of Community Care Liaison have reported experiencing a balance of opportunities to engage in micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level social work (G. Laverre, personal communication, November 30, 2022). While the students spend a significant portion of their time working directly with clients referred to the program, they each have contributed to the development of internal policies and procedures within the Sylva PD and have built partnerships across systems. For example, the current liaison is convening an advisory board of mental health, substance use, and human service professionals in the community. Bringing this group together will provide a structure for input from key partners as the program continues to develop, and will support communication and collaboration among the entire network of agencies in the region.

In addition, students have reported a high level of satisfaction with their overall experiences completing field placements with the Sylva PD; postplacement surveys have indicated that they experienced levels of satisfaction with their placement that were higher than average. “Overall, this placement has been a place of great growth and learning for me,” stated one student. “It has brought out skills that I already had in new ways” (G. Laverre, personal communication, November 30, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Initially, the partnership that led to the development of the Community Care program was framed as an exploration. Is there value, we asked, in working together to figure out how social workers could contribute to less punitive, more community-oriented policing practices in this rural Appalachian community? After a year of planning and a



year of implementation, although there is still much to learn, it is clear that the answer to our initial question is a resounding “yes.”

While the idea of partnerships between law enforcement and social work is not new, both professions (and the communities they serve) have changed dramatically since the first police social work positions were created in the 1950s. The innovative and effective models being used today are largely centered in urban areas, but three out of four police departments across the country employ fewer than two dozen officers, and nine out of ten employ fewer than 50 officers (Hyland & Davis, 2016). In these communities, models like the CAHOOTS program in Oregon might look just as far out of reach as they did to people in Sylva, North Carolina.

As the NASW states, “we must recognize that, as police themselves have been telling us for years, they are doing too much. We must look beyond policing and reimagine public safety to reallocate resources so that communities can have more of what they need to thrive” (Wilson & Wilson, 2020, p.18). And in doing so, we must remember that innovative ideas and partnerships are not only possible, but are imperative, in rural communities as well as in urban settings. The Community Care program is an example of a way in which field educators can facilitate real and lasting community change while also providing deeply meaningful educational opportunities for social work students.

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