

Averting another Walter Wallace Jr. tragedy: \$13 million boost for mental health crisis response

Mayor Kenney’s proposed city budget would up the number of units available and help integrate with police dispatch.



Protesters marched in West Philadelphia after police killed Walter Wallace Jr. while responding to a 911 call
EMMA LEE / WHYY



By [Michaela Winberg](#)

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Six months after [police killed Walter Wallace Jr.](#) in West Philadelphia during a mental health breakdown, Mayor Jim Kenney is proposing a \$13 million boost for the city’s mobile crisis response centers.

The mayor’s [spending plan for the next fiscal year](#), while keeping the PPD budget flat, allocates more money to programs that loop in trained clinicians on police calls involving mental health crises.

Specifically, the administration earmarked \$5.2 million for a mobile triage unit to be administered by the Managing Director’s Office. Another \$7.2 million will help pay for “mobile crisis units”

dispatched by the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services, the city's main mental health arm.

If passed by City Council, the budget would provide an additional \$800,000 to DBHIDS to fund its co-responder pilot program, which launched this month.

Therapist and social worker Nomi Teutsch was excited to hear more funding would go to mobile crisis response. She works in Wallace's old neighborhood, and said most of her clients at The Family Practice & Counseling Network are Black.

After seeing what happened to Wallace last year, Teutsch started recommending her patients call 911 only as a last resort.

"It's incredibly important that mobile crisis gets an increase in funding," Teutsch said. "There are extremely long wait times, and some people report a unit never even comes. In a crisis, that's not going to help. So I would like to see at least four units operating at all times."

The new funding is possible because of the American Rescue Plan, officials said, which provided Philly with \$1.4 billion in federal aid, helping fill [the \\$450 million budget gap](#) caused by the pandemic.

Consortium mobile units: 360 crisis calls - no arrests, no injuries, no deaths

News of the mobile crisis funding comes two weeks after Billy Penn reported Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw has been [slow to implement reforms](#) after Wallace was killed by officers outside his rowhome in October.

The department had enrolled just four officers in a behavioral health training — and had not reached out to the mobile crisis response centers for a potential partnership.

Philadelphia's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services funds two mobile crisis response centers. There's JFK Community Mental Health in North Philly, and The Consortium in West Philly. That's who you reach when you call the city's main crisis hotline at 215-685-6440 or 1-800-273-8255.

Consortium director John White said he had little faith in Outlaw to formally incorporate his mental health response unit. Officials took six months to get a co-responder program rolling, despite vowing immediate action in the wake of Wallace's death.

White, who learned mobile crisis centers could get the extra investment on Wednesday, had previously told Billy Penn that more city funding would be essential for his program.

"We want to expand on the array of services that are being provided through mobile crisis teams, adding at least one or possibly two additional mobile units," he said. "Some of that is dependent upon what happens at City Council, depending on their ability to fund it."

From October to February, the Consortium received 361 calls from West Philadelphians in crisis. Staff only involved police once — and there were no arrests, no injuries and no deaths, according to data provided by the nonprofit.

White recently added an additional mobile response team to the Consortium fleet, going from two to three units to cover the area from the Schuylkill to the end of Cobbs Creek, City Line Avenue to Philadelphia International Airport.

DBHIDS is using a \$2.3 million MacArthur Foundation grant to expand further, and is looking for more people to get involved, according to spokesperson Omoiye Kinney.

Billy Penn's Max Marin contributed reporting.

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