

WALTER WALLACE JR.

Despite national outcry, Philly police slow to implement mental health crisis reforms

It's been six months since officers fatally shot Walter Wallace Jr. while responding to a 911 call.



Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw at a November 2020 press conference announcing the names of the officers who shot and killed Walter Wallace Jr. KIMBERLY PAYNTER / WHY



By [Max Marin](#) and [Michaela Winberg](#)

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It was just after 6 p.m. on a Sunday last April when a mother in West Philadelphia heard an alarming knock at her door. She sent her 9-year-old daughter upstairs before opening to find police officers on her porch, service weapons drawn.

“Does anyone have a gun?” one of the officers asked. Turns out the police had arrived at the wrong address, following a call about a Black man with autism who’d reportedly sent friends

a picture of a gun. The four officers eventually located the man at his home without incident, according to police records obtained by Billy Penn.

During a similar dispatch seven months later, two of the same officers responding to a similar call [would fatally shoot Walter Wallace Jr.](#)

The April incident involving police officers Thomas Munz and Sean Matarazzo, reported here for the first time, highlights the regularity with which police are tasked to respond to mental health crises. Following Munz and Matarazzo's October 2020 killing of Wallace, Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw promised to implement changes that would prevent situations like that from turning fatal.

Six months later, advocates say Outlaw's promises have been slow to materialize.

Last Monday the Philadelphia Police Department began piloting a new, two-week behavioral health training, said spokesperson Sgt. Eric Gripp. Only four officers are enrolled.

The department instituted a more widespread one-week crisis intervention training last December, Gripp said. About 3,100 officers, fewer than half of uniformed force, have now participated and are allowed to carry Tasers. Police try to dispatch these officers using a new 911 call script use that reportedly helps identify a mental health crisis. Gripp would not immediately share the script with a Billy Penn reporter.

But behavioral health professionals on the front lines remain lacking, and community leaders are skeptical.

"I didn't believe that for a moment," said John White, director of mental health center The Consortium, speaking about [Outlaw's pledge to implement change](#). The West Philadelphia community clinic had been providing Wallace care prior to his death.

In the intervening months, there hasn't been any outreach, White said. "We haven't heard from the commissioner."

With 911 the 'only' choice, lawmakers and advocates push for training

The West Philly mother at the wrong April address later filed a formal complaint against the officers, claiming they had pointed their handguns at her. According to records obtained by Billy Penn, she felt disrespected and "wonder[ed]s if the situation would have been different had her son answered the door."

Internal Affairs investigators ultimately dismissed the complaint against Ofc. Munz and Ofc. Matarazzo, as well as the two others who responded with them to the scene that day. Body camera footage showed police unholstered their weapons, but never pointed them at anyone, according to records.

Unlike the Wallace incident, this police dispatch ended without gunshots, but advocates aren't thrilled with how it went down.

“‘Autistic’ is the first word in the dispatch,” said Rev. Mark Tyler, a pastor and police reform activist in Philadelphia. “That should alert the department to say, who do we have that we could take with us?”

Police serve as de facto social workers who respond to a crushing volume of domestic-related incidents every day. This is true in Philadelphia and around the United States. People with mental health issues are [16 times more likely to be killed](#) by law enforcement, according to a 2015 study by the Treatment Advocacy Center, an Arlington-based advocacy group.

After a nationwide spate of high-profile police custody deaths, including that of Walter Wallace Jr., [lawmakers in at least eight states](#) are introducing legislation to press for updated training and other crisis response changes.

The difference [between a peaceful and violent outcome](#) in cases like these, Tyler noted, hinges on that training, plus various other unpredictable factors that can arise during emergency calls.

“We only have one choice [for a crisis response] right now — 911,” he said, “We have to have different people who can respond.”

Before Wallace’s death last October, the Philadelphia Police Dept. had announced it was putting behavioral health experts in the radio room with 911 dispatchers to help flag emergency calls that might have mental health risk.

No such person was present the afternoon [police were called to Wallace’s house](#). Outlaw later admitted the department also failed to build a formal relationship with crisis response providers that could have intervened on Wallace’s behalf, like The Consortium, and she vowed to implement a new unit in the department “as soon as possible.”

Mental health groups still waiting, PPD training opaque

Steve Nolan is a former internal affairs official who spent decades investigating police shootings in the department’s Internal Affairs Bureau, sometimes dozens each year. He recalled pushing for better training, especially for dealing with people in the throes of a mental health crisis, who he believed might be trying to commit what he called “suicide by cop.”

“I would send memo after memo,” Nolan said. “‘We’re shooting way too many people, we’re shooting people with hairbrushes and lighters. What are we doing about this?’ ”

On-duty shootings have dropped significantly over the past five years. PPD records show just [12 police shootings](#) in 2018, compared to 60 in 2009. Still, Nolan said, the goal is to get to zero.

The Consortium in West Philadelphia, which is one of two mental health centers in Philly funded by the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services, or DBHIDS, got 361 calls between last October and this February. Police were only involved in one. 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. There are plans for more expansion, DBHIDS told Billy Penn, with funding coming out of a \$2.3 million MacArthur Foundation grant. The department is currently looking for more people to get involved, said spokesperson Omoiye Kinney.

Meanwhile, the scope of the PPD's pilot program appears to be limited. Police said they'd piloted a similar behavioral health model in Kensington to help people with substance abuse disorders, but the exact details of the current training remain unclear.

Sgt. Gripp, the police spokesperson, said the "comprehensive" two-week training will re-educate the participating officers on a "de-escalation model, behavioral health issues, and reality-based scenarios." The four officers enrolled are reportedly each teamed up with a behavioral health clinician.

Consortium director White hasn't yet seen them in action. "We still have not met the co-responders they say they have," he said. "We haven't seen the [911] script. We don't know where the mental health professionals are."

By July, he hopes to launch a new effort: follow-up visits not just to people who've experienced mental health crises, but also their families, as the [emergencies can be traumatic for everyone involved](#).

"This is all a constant reference to Walter Wallace Jr.," White said. "We'll be having a conversation and out of nowhere someone will say, 'Well, you don't want another Walter Wallace situation. How do we avoid that?' That becomes the measuring stick for how we function."

In the meantime, he's encouraging people facing mental health crises to think before they dial. "Until there is confidence that every police officer, or at least specialized officers, are available to respond like that through 911," White said, "it's best to call the hotline."

Philadelphia's main crisis hotline is 215-685-6440 or 1-800-273-8255. It's available 24 hours a day.

The Consortium operates Mondays through Fridays, 10am-11pm. Its direct number is 267-233-5259.

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