

WALTER WALLACE JR.

Philly in the ‘Final Stages’ of Multi-Million Dollar Reforms Promised After Police Killed Walter Wallace Jr.

One crisis responder says the city is “living up to its commitment.”



Community leaders and members of the clergy led a march the day after Walter Wallace Jr. was killed by police

EMMA LEE / WHY



Michaela Winberg

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A year after [Walter Wallace Jr. was killed by police](#) while in the throes of a mental health crisis, Philadelphia is making progress on the promise to reform the city’s response to emergencies of that kind.

Many of the logistics are still being ironed out, but John White, executive director of a [mobile crisis center called The Consortium](#), is pleased with the efforts so far. “As far as the mental health piece is concerned, they’ve lived up to their commitment,” White said. “They’ve expanded the services, they’ve added some bells and whistles to improve outcomes.”

Mayor Jim Kenney proposed a [\\$13 million boost](#) for Philly's crisis response system in his budget last spring. Since then, officials have been negotiating the funding, dividing it up, and selecting contractors, according to Christina Crews, a spokesperson for the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services.

In his original pitch, Kenney earmarked \$7.2 million to beef up the city's existing mobile crisis response teams and \$5.2 million for a new mobile triage unit, including close to \$1 million for a DBHIDS co-responder program in the 911 dispatch room.

What do we know about the progress of these promised reforms? Here's where each of the proposals stand.

\$7.2 million for mobile crisis response teams

This one is in the "final stages" of procurement and contracting, according to Crews, the spokesperson for DBHIDS which is managing the program.

The money is going toward expanding the city's existing mobile crisis response teams, run by [The Consortium](#) in West Philly and Center City's [JFK Behavioral Health Center](#). It will also help staff the existing [Philadelphia Crisis Line](#).

With the new funding, Consortium director White said he's expecting to be able to expand to 24/7 mobile services, instead of the current 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. weekday schedule. He also plans to double the number of teams from four to eight, and possibly open an in-person crisis center

White also wants to start a 72-hour follow-up service, to check on patients and their families after the initial crisis.

"We're no longer simply dealing with the individual, because they're not the only person experiencing the trauma," White told Billy Penn. "We're adding a family component to be able to help people get access to needed services."

The funding bucket will reportedly also pay to start some brand new mobile teams from unannounced partners.

\$5.2 million for a cross-department mobile triage unit

Called the crisis intervention response training, or CIRT, program, this effort partners mental health professionals with police officers.

A collab between the Managing Director's Office and police, it's still in its pilot phase, with only one provider involved so far. It's seeking a second provider now through the RFP process, said Crews, the DBHIDS spokesperson. She expects the pilot to expand this winter.

By next summer, PPD spokesperson Eric McLaurin said the CIRT program will be rolled out citywide and incorporated into a new Behavioral Health Unit, which will fall under the Police Special Operations Unit.

It'll end up costing the MDO \$4.6 million, with the remaining \$800k used for 911 radio room reforms (see below).

\$800k for a 911 co-responder program

Of the \$5.2 million above, the remaining \$788,560 (to be exact) will pay to hire behavioral health staff to work in the 911 radio room, Crews said. This effort is still in the process of being implemented.

As it now stands, there's just one mental health crisis "navigator" present to support dispatchers during weekday daytime shifts.

The Managing Directors' Office is recruiting people with behavioral health experience, per Crews, and has trained 90% of existing staff in crisis intervention training.

The dispatch center has already adopted [a new script to help 911 call-takers](#) identify mental health crises and deploy the right resources. Police spokesperson McLaurin confirmed they're still using the script, and it's been revised a few times in response to staffers' recommendations.

"This has allowed us to send CIT-trained officers directly to more calls than ever before," McLaurin said. "It has become a valuable tool to help identify individuals in crisis and/or emotionally disturbed."

According to police, Dispatchers used the script to identify 55,000 calls that required crisis intervention training, out of 2,374,000 calls from November 2020 through October 2021.

A new number to call?

Even with the 911 reforms, The Consortium's executive director White said he's still not confident a mental health emergency wouldn't end in violence/

So he's working to inform people of alternatives to calling the police. This year, he's distributed 50,000 magnets that display the number for Philadelphia's crisis hotline.

"It's going to be very difficult to break people of that habit of using 911, but we've got to start somewhere," White said.

Nationally, a new mental health emergency hotline is expected to be up and running

by July 2022. It'll be reachable by [dialing 988](#), which advocates hope will be easier for people than remembering the 10-digit [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#).

For White, Wallace Jr.'s death still stings. He wishes his crews had been called to the scene rather than armed police officers, or at least alongside them. But he's optimistic about the city's new funding.

"This is the first step toward prevention," White said. "The best way to avoid another Walter Wallace situation is to prevent them from happening. To see that focus now added to the whole structure — the picture, the vision — is very, very important."

Source: <https://billypenn.com/2021/11/04/walter-wallace-jr-philadelphia-police-reforms-mental-health-crisis/>

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