

GEORGIA CRIMINAL JUSTICE DATA LANDSCAPE INSIGHTS

ATLANTA POLICING ALTERNATIVES
AND DIVERSION CASE STUDY



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Introduction

In the United States, law enforcement officers have an increased responsibility to respond to, assess, and intervene in situations with behavioral health crises, including mental illness and substance use.^{1,2} Many states are adopting diversion-oriented initiatives to assist law enforcement officers and redirect individuals with behavioral health crises from the criminal justice system to the behavioral health system.³

As of December 2021, 25 states and the District of Columbia had laws regarding diversion programs, but these laws vary from state to state.⁴ One popular model is Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) programs, which divert individuals with behavioral health challenges from the justice system to an intensive case management program with support services and treatment.⁵ LEAD originated in Seattle, Washington, in 2011 but has expanded to 21 additional states, with more sites in development. As the focus of this case study, the Policing Alternatives and Diversion (PAD) Initiative was modeled after LEAD programs and designed as a community-engaged diversion program in Atlanta, Georgia.

Noting a lack of uniformity among states, the White House released the Model Law Enforcement and Other First Responders Deflection Act⁶ in 2022 to encourage states to implement diversion programs. Such programs can include a wide array of programming, including Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT), co-responder models, crisis stabilization triages, and LEAD programs.

PAD Initiative

The PAD Initiative in Atlanta, Georgia, offers a unique approach to community safety and wellness by diverting people from arrest and incarceration, primarily those who have needs related to substance use, mental health, and extreme poverty.⁷ PAD operates as an alternative to involvement with the criminal justice system by simultaneously responding to community concerns and addressing the needs of the individual. The PAD Initiative has six primary goals:

1. To reduce criminal justice system involvement
2. To reorient attitudes and responses to public suffering
3. To improve public safety and public health
4. To strengthen social service infrastructure
5. To reinvest criminal justice savings
6. To shift culture and heal relationships⁸



PAD achieves these goals primarily through two strategies: community response services and pre-arrest diversion services. The initiative offers community response services through its partnership with the City of Atlanta’s 311 (ATL311) nonemergency services line. PAD accepts community referrals for nonemergency issues concerning individuals dealing with substance use, mental illness, or extreme poverty.⁹ These concerns include common disturbances, public indecency, welfare needs, mental health, substance use, basic needs, and public health.

The PAD referral coordination team receives referrals from community members through ATL311 and dispatches a two-person PAD community response team to the area. The community response team talks with the referred individual and, if the individual agrees, the team works to identify their needs and what assistance can be offered. The teams can provide direct services to consenting individuals based on their needs, including emergency shelter, housing assistance, transportation, food assistance, and connections to partner agencies and other service providers.

PAD emphasizes working with historically under-served and marginalized populations, including those impacted by racial disparities in the criminal justice system and those in the LGBTQ+ community.

Individuals dealing with substance abuse, mental illness, or poverty can be diverted pre-arrest, when law enforcement officers provide immediate assistance instead of arrest.¹⁰ Pre-arrest diversions are a partnership among the local police departments; Fulton County offices of the District Attorney, Public Defender, and Solicitor General; and City of Atlanta offices

of the Public Defender and Solicitor. PAD accepts diversions from Atlanta Police Department (APD), MARTA Police Department,^a Georgia State University, and Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) police officers.

If a law enforcement officer makes a referral, a PAD referral coordinator dispatches a two-person community response team to respond to the request and meet with the individual to assess their needs. If the individual agrees to receive help and the officer agrees as well, then no police report is made, the officer leaves the scene, and the community response team completes an intake assessment. After the intake process, the community response team can provide direct support to meet the immediate needs of the individual, including a bag of groceries, hygiene products, a ride home, MARTA cards, and connection to PAD’s care navigation team. A care

^a MARTA—Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority—provides bus and rail public transportation.



navigator then contacts the individual within 48 hours to provide ongoing case management, housing support, legal system navigation, food assistance, and medical care.

PAD's services are rooted in principles of harm reduction and housing first, with the aim of reducing contact with law enforcement and allowing individuals to make their own dignified choices in the process.

PAD's services are rooted in principles of harm reduction and housing first, with the aim of reducing contact with law enforcement and allowing individuals to make their own choices. Harm reduction is a behavioral change approach that focuses on minimizing harmful consequences and emphasizes positive steps taken toward increasing the safety of the individual and those around them.¹¹ A harm reduction approach recognizes that big changes

do not happen right away and that a process of small changes over time is more effective for sustaining meaningful change. For example, for someone who uses substances, harm reduction strategies might include using clean needles and alcohol swabs, or reducing the daily amount of substances used. For others, that may mean abstinence. Housing first focuses on finding accessible and immediate options for housing that do not require readiness conditions such as abstinence or adherence to certain types of treatment. By providing housing first, a person can then focus on addressing other challenges.

Evolution of the PAD Initiative

PAD began as a two-year pilot in late 2017 that accepted diversions from four APD beats.^b By 2019, the initiative had completed the four-beat pilot, had expanded to 28 APD beats, and had diverted 150 individuals. In 2020, the LEAD National Support Bureau, an organization that helps guide and support LEAD programs, identified PAD as one of seven national sites to serve as a model for LEAD services. Additionally, the Atlanta City Council expanded PAD citywide to cover all six APD zones.

To build on the success of its pre-arrest diversion services, PAD examined over three years of 911 call data and conducted surveys with city stakeholders to design a process for offering community response services—what is now the community referral line (ATL311)—in addition to pre-arrest diversion services. PAD launched its community response services in early 2021. By the summer of that year, services were expanded citywide. In 2021, PAD diverted 281

^b The Atlanta Police Department divides the city into six geographic areas, known as zones. Those zones are, in turn, divided into smaller geographic areas, or beats.



individuals and responded to 847 community response calls, successfully providing services for 399 individuals from those calls (Figure 1).¹² PAD also provided 215 participants with weekly case management services and provided emergency housing to 541 individuals.

Figure 1. Key PAD Outcomes, 2021

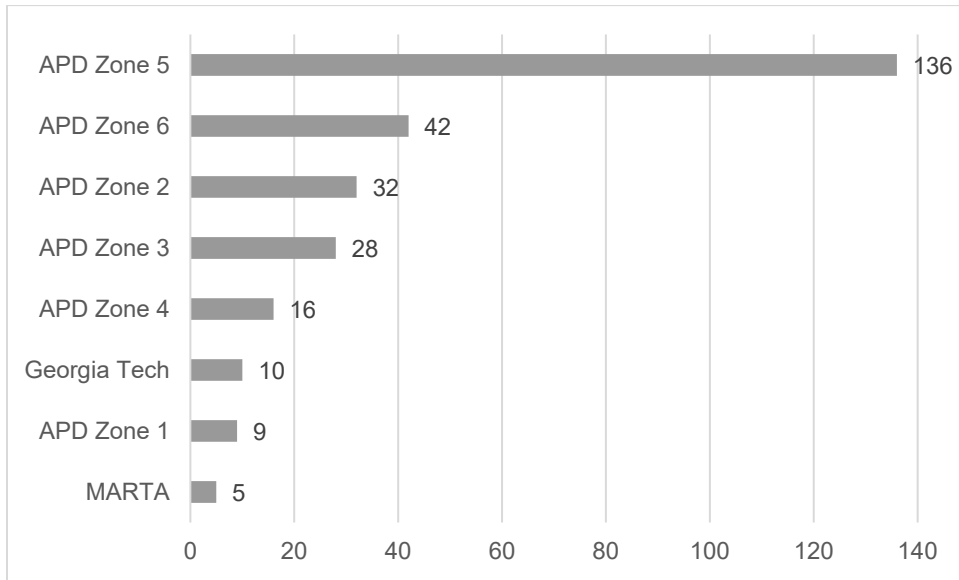
Diversions	281
Emergency Housing Provided	541
ATL311 Calls Responded	847
Police Officers Trained	466

Source: PAD

Of the 281 pre-arrest diversions in 2021, 266 were received from APD, five from MARTA police, and 10 from Georgia Tech police (Figure 2). More than half of the APD diversions came from Zone 5, located in the center of the city. Additionally, 26 diversions were already PAD participants. At the time of diversion, law enforcement officers most commonly reported homelessness and poverty as the primary concerns (81.7%), but diversions often included multiple concerns (Figure 3).

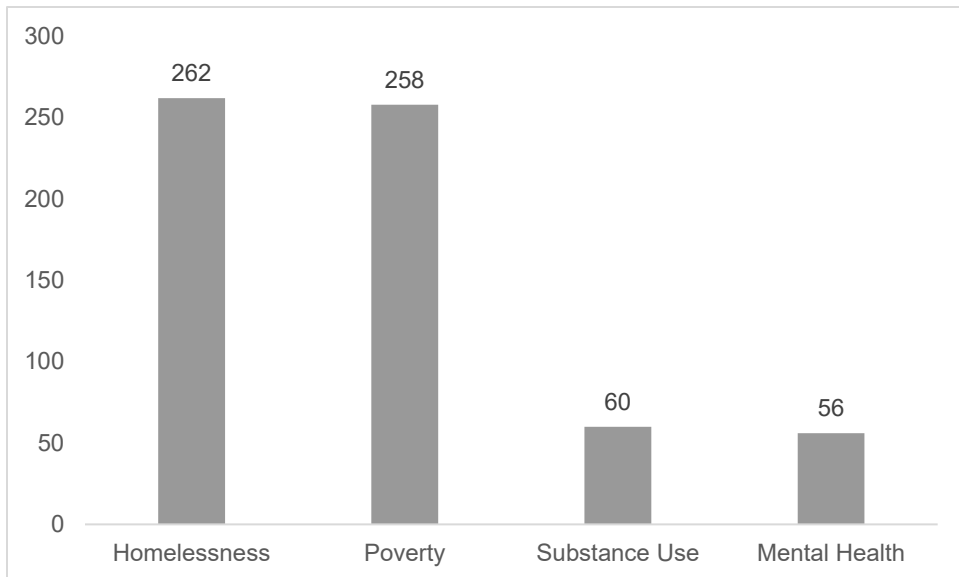


Figure 2. Number of Diversions, by APD Zone or Other Law Enforcement Agency, 2021



Source: PAD

Figure 3. Concerns of the Diverted Population at Time of Diversion, 2021

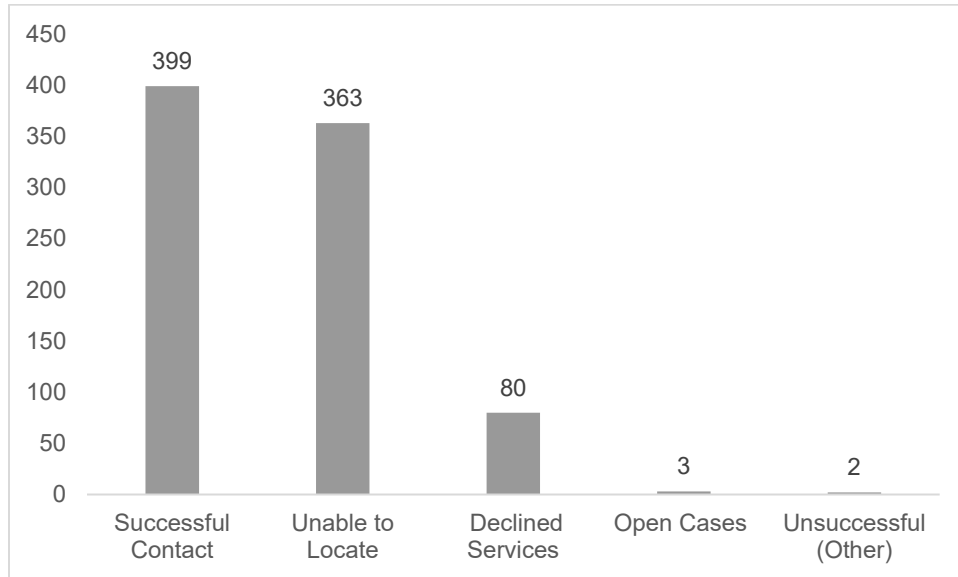


Note: Diversions often include multiple concerns, so diverted individuals can be included in multiple concern categories.

Source: PAD

Excluding duplicate calls (93), PAD responded to all 847 community referrals through ATL311. Of these, 738 referred someone else and 109 requested assistance for themselves. PAD was able to successfully contact and provide services for 399 individuals, but program responders could not locate 363 individuals (Figure 4). Given the large number of individuals dealing with issues of homelessness and the transient nature of the population in need, individuals can be difficult to locate even with immediate responses from a harm reduction team.

Figure 4. PAD Community Response Outcomes, 2021



Source: PAD

Continuing to Grow

In 2022, PAD reported 369 total diversions, including some individuals who were referred more than once. Of those referrals, 331 came from pre-arrest and 38 from post-booking by a legal agency partner (Figure 5).¹³ Similar to 2021, over half of the pre-arrest diversions came from Zone 5 (188). The average response time to diversions over the course of the year was 20 minutes.

On the community response side, PAD responded to 1,321 requests, nearly 75% of which received an in-person response within 30 minutes. Care navigation teams enrolled 382 new participants, for a total of 582 participants. PAD provided emergency housing to 304

participants, secured placement in residential substance use treatment for 145 participants, and placed 141 participants in bridge housing.^c

Figure 5. Key PAD Outcomes, 2022

Diversions	369
ATL311 Call Responses	1,321
Successful Engagements	592
New Participants	382
Total Participants Enrolled	582

Source: PAD

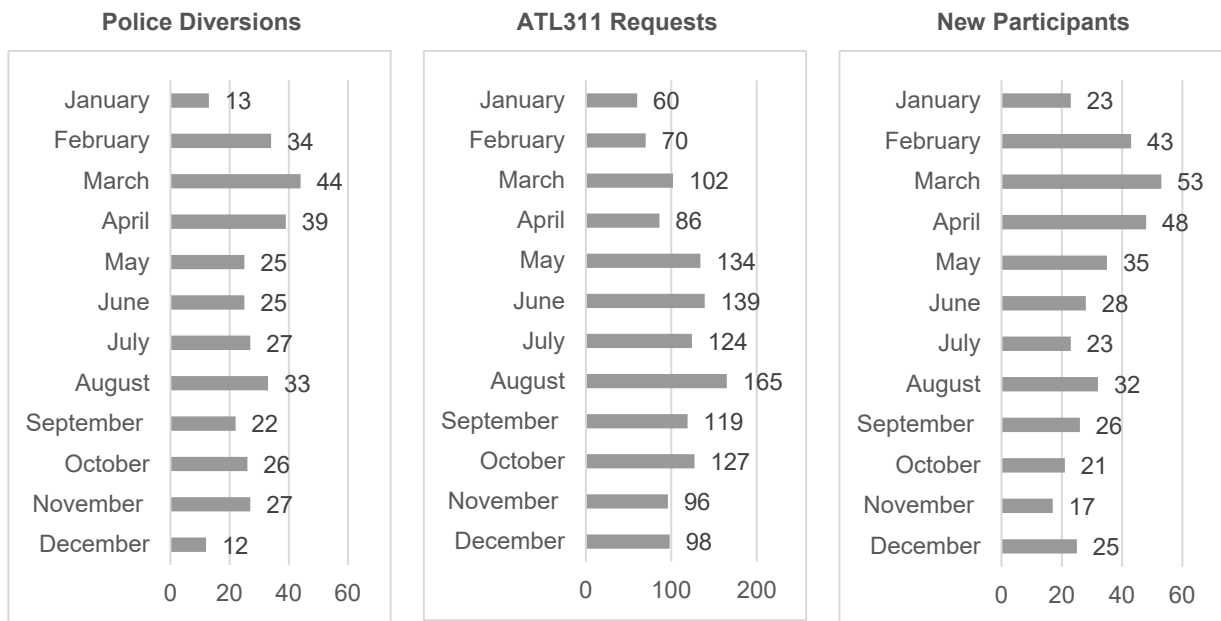
PAD also increased community involvement in 2022 by engaging 275 businesses, attending community events, and appearing in the media. In response to this work, the National Football League (NFL) selected PAD as one of five national grant partners as part of the NFL’s Inspire Change Initiative in 2022. As will be discussed later, PAD’s efforts in the community contributed to cost avoidance, less contact with law enforcement, and better outcomes for people.

^c Bridge housing is transitional, short-term shelter prior to a person entering a permanent housing program.



Figure 6 shows monthly totals for pre-arrest diversions in 2022. February to April was the busiest period, with a peak of 44 diversions in March. The lowest number of pre-arrest diversions occurred in the winter months of January and December, with just 13 and 12 diversions, respectively. For ATL311 requests, calls from the community were highest in the summer months, peaking in August at 165 requests. Enrollment of new PAD participants also varied throughout the year. Much like police diversions, the largest number of new participants enrolled in February to April, with a peak of 53 new participants in March.

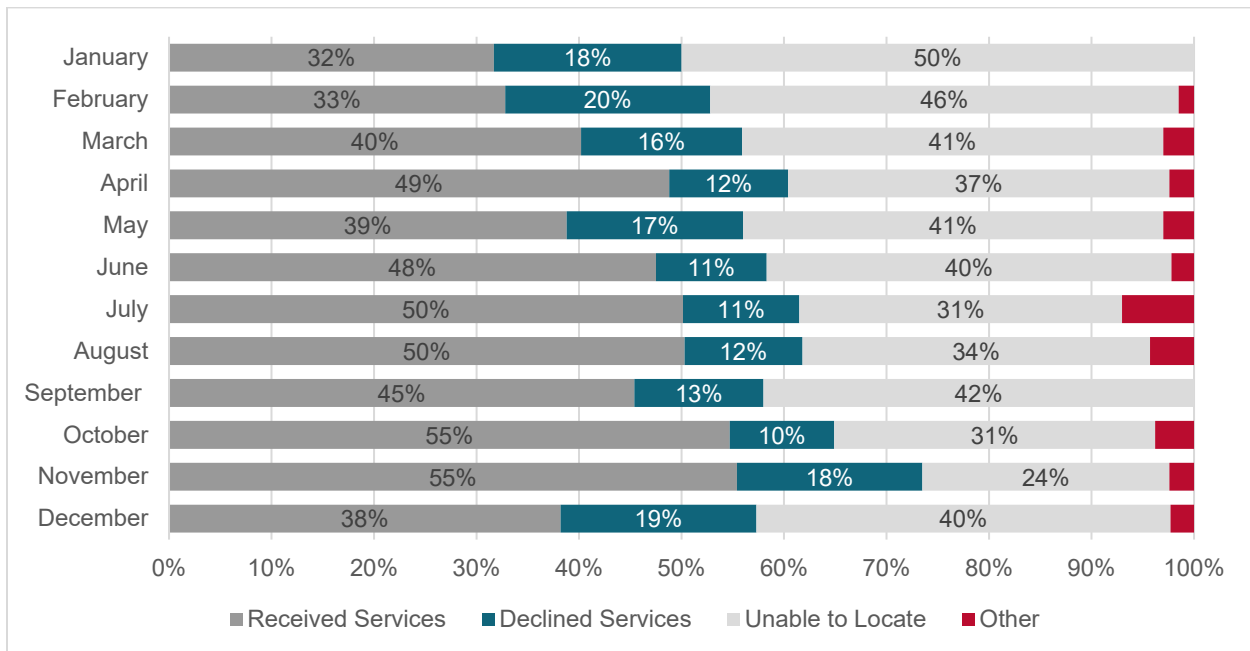
Figure 6. PAD Outcomes, by Month, 2022



Source: PAD

ATL311 response outcomes in 2022 varied, but overall, the most prominent outcome was that the individual received services (Figure 7). The highest percentages for receiving services occurred in the second half of the year, with a peak of 55% in the months of October and November. The second-most-prominent outcome was being unable to locate the individual, which was highest during the beginning of 2022. Approximately 10–20% each month opted to decline services, which could also include individuals who were already working with other service providers.

Figure 7. ATL311 Request Response Outcomes, by Month, 2022



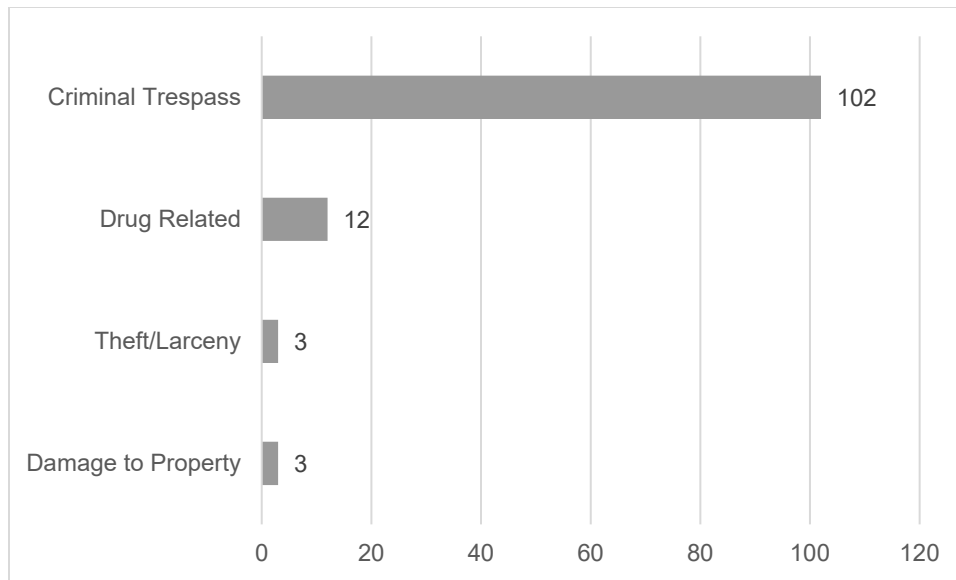
Note: “Declined Services” may include individuals who are already working with other service providers or would prefer to be re-engaged at another time.

Source: PAD

In December 2022, PAD analyzed the financial savings from diversions, focusing solely on those who would otherwise have been booked into Fulton County Jail.¹⁴ Through the end of October 2022, law enforcement diverted 120 individuals to PAD who would otherwise have been incarcerated at Fulton County Jail (Figure 8). These diversions resulted in an estimated savings for Fulton County of \$524,160, or just over \$52,000 per month, that would have otherwise been spent on jail stays. If booked, the majority of diverted individuals would have faced charges for criminal trespassing, which is consistent with this population’s need for behavioral health services or services related to extreme poverty.

During the same period, APD booked 658 people into Fulton County Jail who were potentially eligible for diversion. These missed diversions during PAD operating hours resulted in an estimated cost of approximately \$2.8 million, or \$280,000 per month, to Fulton County. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that pre-arrest diversion program participation is associated with reductions in criminal justice system costs.¹⁵

Figure 8. Diversions to PAD, by Officer-Reported Charge, 2022



Note: Charge denotes what the individual would have faced had they not been diverted. Based on diversions from Fulton County Jail only.

Source: PAD

From its official launch in 2017 to the end of 2022, PAD grew significantly: Its community response staff expanded from 11 to 55 people in less than a year. PAD is also part of the Justice Policy Board, a shared governance model that is working to develop and operate Atlanta’s Center for Diversion and Services.¹⁶ In a partnership with Fulton County, PAD, and Grady Memorial Hospital, the Diversion Center will provide essential services for participants, including peer reception,^d behavioral health screenings, nonemergency medical care, sobering rooms, case management, warrant resolution, food, clothing, and showers. The Diversion

^d “A Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) is an individual who is trained and certified to provide ongoing support to individuals and their families receiving mental health and/or substance use recovery support and services. CPSs work from the perspective of their lived experience to help build environments conducive to recovery.” (Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. n.d. “Certified Peer Specialists.” Retrieved from dbhdd.georgia.gov/recovery-transformation/cps)

Center will expand PAD's reach to provide 24-hour services and increase the level of support provided to individuals in need.

Interviews with Community Response Team and Law Enforcement

For this case study of the PAD initiative, the UGA Institute of Government interviewed three stakeholders. Two community response team members shared insight into PAD's practices, evolution, and future growth, and one law enforcement liaison officer provided a law enforcement perspective. Interviewers asked the community response team members how long they had been with PAD, how they became interested in working for PAD, what a normal day on the job looks like, and how they see PAD continuing to evolve. (See Appendix A for the interview guide.) The law enforcement liaison officer discussed how they heard about PAD, what the diversion process looks like from their end, strengths and challenges to the collaboration process, and how they see PAD evolving. (See Appendix B for the interview guide.)

Both team members had been with PAD for less than six months but were invigorated by the work of the organization and appreciated the potential for upward mobility within PAD. One learned about PAD through their prior work in the food service industry in downtown Atlanta, where they often called PAD for people in need. The other saw PAD's work on the news and had a family member who was a care navigator for PAD. The liaison officer, on the other hand, has worked with PAD for nearly three years and originally heard about PAD and the liaison officer position from a former supervisor. The team members' backgrounds differ substantially. One has degrees in sociology and psychology and spent time as an intern in the DeKalb County Public Defender's office. The other has a master's degree in divinity and experience as a youth minister and working with nonprofit organizations for children.

When asked to describe a normal day for a community response team member, both respondents mentioned that their work varies but generally involves stocking the team vans with supplies (i.e., diversion bags with food, hygiene supplies, clothing, snack bags, Kroger cards, MARTA cards, etc.) and responding to calls for diversion. One member stated, "Some days are busier than others. If you are diverting a person early in the morning, depending on the person's temperament and needs, it could take an hour and a half or it could take most of the day." The liaison officer said they try to be proactive in their role when canvassing the downtown area and monitoring radio calls for low-level crimes that may benefit from PAD intervention. If the liaison officer is not the immediate officer responding to a situation, they try



to talk with officers at the scene to see if the individual would be a good candidate for PAD's services. If the individual is a good fit, the liaison officer tells them about PAD and explains that charges will be dropped. The PAD team completes the initial paperwork once they arrive. Care then transfers to PAD.

"I love seeing a person come back after diversion and seeing them cleaner and well-fed ... it's gratifying to see the handcuffs come off."

PAD Community Response Team Member

Regular daily duties for community response team members include completing intake paperwork, working with officers on the scene, providing a hot meal, and for some, providing emergency housing. The team members also discussed what they enjoy most about the position. One stated, "It's really rewarding. I love seeing a person come back after diversion and seeing them cleaner and well-fed ... it's gratifying to see the handcuffs come off." The other added, "Connecting with individuals at the human level and meeting them where they are, having

conversations ... people overlook the small conversational stuff ... it brightens your day to make an impact in a positive way." The liaison officer expressed a similar sentiment, stating, "It makes my day, to see the smile on their faces, knowing they won't get arrested and [will] get the proper resources. It's a part of protecting and serving." The officer added, "If a citizen sees someone cares for them, it's a good start for building the relationship with law enforcement ... I want to make a big impact and help people ... it's about treating people the way I want to be treated."

Both team members discussed on-the-job challenges as well as challenges facing PAD as a whole, including the limitations of being consent-based ("some people just say 'no'"), lack of trust, and the politics surrounding the criminal justice system and harm reduction work. With respect to engagement and trust, one member stated, "Re-engagement can help with trust; people remember us. For instance, remembering someone's name can go a long way. Forging connections on a human level and building trust."

"It makes my day, to see the smile on their faces, knowing they won't get arrested and [will] get the proper resources. It's a part of protecting and serving."

PAD Liaison Law Enforcement Officer



Both community response team members see their primary role as a type of first responder, with one saying, “I see myself as the first line of care, support, and helping them [find] the life they want to lead.” The other stressed, “We are not here to enact the law. We are not here to replace the police. Our job is to help people in these nonemergency issues.” The liaison officer also acknowledged that timing and consent can be initial barriers and that mental health can play a role in whether someone understands what PAD is and can offer consent. The liaison officer added, “Situations can escalate quickly [if they think they’re going to jail], but I try to talk them down with a calm voice. If they accept this program, they don’t go to jail. It’s all about how you treat and talk to people.”

“I see myself as the first line of care, support, and helping them [find] the life they want to lead.”

PAD Community Response Team Member

The team members also discussed PAD’s unique qualities. They said PAD is quick to spring into action. They also highlighted how working directly with law enforcement but also having a community response element sets them apart. One member said, “Our approach makes us unique ... our approach with a conscious effort to be people-centered and one step ahead in how we engage, how we help, and the staff we have.” The liaison officer offered similar statements,

saying there is increased awareness of who PAD is and what they do, mentioning, “ATL311 is growing rapidly. Everyone is aware of it now ... PAD is always being mentioned, and arrestees even ask about it.”

Both team members indicated that they have seen PAD grow considerably in the short time they have been there. They see PAD “evolving everyday” with efforts to expand the harm reduction teams, new strategies to approach community members, competency trainings, new programs and initiatives, and the Diversion Center. One added, “We are constantly doing things to optimize response time and quality ... we are also developing a protocol to assist people with diabetic emergencies.” The liaison officer noted that the new Diversion Center will be a tremendous asset as it “makes them bigger and better. Officers will get more exposure to PAD and be able to utilize their services more.”

Finally, one community response team member summarized PAD’s key strengths as “the three P’s: proactive, progressive, and personable. We continue to do those things on a daily basis, and we’ll continue to do well.”



Conclusion

The PAD Initiative in Atlanta, Georgia, has been in operation for less than a decade but has seen considerable growth each year, both in the number of people assisted and in the overall size of the organization. Anchored in principles of harm reduction, PAD provides direct services to individuals to reduce their involvement with the criminal justice system, while also embedding staff members in the community they serve. PAD began with pre-arrest diversion services but has expanded to accept referrals from the community and seeks to continue expanding through the new Diversion Center. PAD's continued growth relies heavily on the ability of its response teams to connect with community members, its partnerships with law enforcement, and its continued success in addressing the needs of individuals dealing with issues of substance use, mental health, and extreme poverty.

For communities looking to implement similar programs, factors such as priority population characteristics, support from community stakeholders, economic conditions, and the availability of related resources (i.e., housing, transportation, food) should all be taken into consideration. Additionally, for LEAD and associated programs, community buy-in and consistent engagement is required from various stakeholders including law enforcement, behavioral health professionals, legislators, service providers, and other community members. As more communities look to implement diversion-oriented programs, the PAD Initiative in Atlanta is a promising example to draw upon.



Appendix A. Interview Guide for Community Response Team Members

- How long have you worked with PAD?
- What is your background? (i.e., education, professional)
- Have you held other positions with PAD aside from community response team member?
- How did you become interested in working for PAD?
- How did you originally hear about PAD?
- What does a normal day on the job look like for you?
- What do you enjoy the most about your current position?
- What do you enjoy the least about your current position?
- What do you see is your primary role as a community response team member?
- What is the biggest challenge facing the community response team?
- How much have you seen PAD evolve since you've been a part of the organization?
- What makes PAD unique compared to other organizations doing similar work?
- How do you see PAD changing/evolving in the future?
- What strengths do you see for PAD to continue to grow/evolve?
- What are some challenges to future growth?
- Is there anything else that I have not mentioned that you would like to share? (About PAD or your current role)



Appendix B. Interview Guide for Law Enforcement Officer

- What is your current role?
- What is your background? (i.e., education, professional)
- How did you originally hear about PAD?
- Have you made referrals to PAD before? What does this experience typically look like?
- What do you enjoy the most about collaborating with PAD?
- What do you enjoy the least about collaborating with PAD?
- What do you see is your primary role with respect to your involvement with PAD?
- What do you see as the biggest challenge during the referral or diversion process?
- How much have you seen PAD evolve since you've started in law enforcement?
- What makes PAD unique compared to other organizations doing similar work?
- How do you see PAD changing/evolving in the future?
- What strengths do you see for PAD to continue to grow/evolve? What strengths do you see in the collaboration process between law enforcement and PAD?
- What are some challenges to their future growth? What are some challenges to the collaboration process between law enforcement and PAD?
- Is there anything else that I have not mentioned that you would like to share? (About PAD or your current role)



Endnotes

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