



What you need to know about Denver in 5 min.

[\(https://denverite.com/newsletter-signup/\)](https://denverite.com/newsletter-signup/)

[. \(https://denverite.com\)](https://denverite.com)

A long-planned program to remove police from some 911 calls launched as Denver's streets erupted in police brutality protests

The timing was a coincidence, but the stakes have never been higher.



The Support Team Assisted Response van. June 8, 2020. (Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite)

Kevin Beaty

Jun. 08, 2020, 9:44 a.m.

Roshan Bliss has been trying to find ways to curb police violence for years and scored a major victory at the beginning of the month, just as Denver started protesting racism and police brutality.

Bliss, a volunteer and co-chair of the Denver Justice Project (<https://www.denverjusticeproject.org/>), helped shepherd a pilot project into existence that's now diverting some 911 calls away from armed officers to an unassuming van manned by a Denver Health paramedic and a social worker from the Mental Health Center of Denver. It's called Support Team Assisted Response, or STAR, and the idea is to send more appropriate responses to 911 calls that have

In search of Denver news?

Get it sent right to your inbox! Sign up for our free, useful and delightful newsletter today!

Enter your email address here...

Sign me up!

health crises or people who just need help connecting to services. A grant from the Caring 4 Denver fund (<http://caringfordenver.org/>), which voters approved in 2019, has given STAR at least six months to prove it can be effective.

STAR is one way to “dismantle policing,” Bliss says, an idea that’s become talked about widely and loudly during protests reacting to the killing of George Floyd. The pilot program coincidentally began while massive actions against police brutality entered their fifth consecutive day in Denver.

As protests call for change, here’s where ten years of massive Denver police and jail spending has gotten us (<https://denverite.com/2020/09/14/as-people-protest-for-change-heres-where-ten-years-of-massive-denver-police-and-jail-spending-have-gotten-us/>)

Bliss and his colleagues began publicly talking about the program — or elements of it, at least — in 2017, including to a then-Denver police commander named Paul Pazen (<https://denverite.com/2019/06/10/community-groups-will-begin-taking-on-911-calls-and-low-level-cases-from-the-denver-da/>). When Pazen became chief in 2018, he was primed to help get the ball rolling. Last year, Bliss, some fellow activists and a delegation of local lawmakers took a trip to Eugene, Oregon, where a system like STAR has been in operation for more than 30 years (<https://whitebirdclinic.org/cahoots/>). Bliss believes Denver is the first major city in the nation to copy Eugene’s model, removing police from situations that they themselves could make more dangerous.

The stakes are high, activists say.

If mental health workers had been sent to the motel where Michael Marshall, who had schizophrenia, was accused of trespassing, Bliss believes he could have avoided the Denver jail where he was later killed by sheriff’s deputies

(<https://www.denverpost.com/2017/11/01/michael-marshall-jail-death-settlement/>).

Many of the names heard shouted at marches this week — Paul Castaway

(<https://kdvr.com/news/no-charges-filed-against-officer-in-shooting-death-of-paul-castaway/>), Paul Childs (<https://www.denverpost.com/2005/06/07/cop-recounts-slaying-of-teen/>), Marvin Booker (<https://denverite.com/2017/09/28/seven-years-marvin-booker-died-denver-jail-da-beth-mccann-asks-grand-jury-investigate/>)

who died after contacts with police; Bliss thinks these cases very well could have been diverted to STAR, had it started sooner.

Most 911 calls, he said, stem from deeper issues like a lack of affordable housing or difficulty accessing food or mental health resources. He said American society has passed too many of our problems on to police departments which will continue to deal with many non-violent emergencies.

In search of Denver news?
Get it sent right to your inbox! Sign up
for our free, useful and delightful
newsletter today!

Enter your email address here

Sign me up!

“We can work towards different ways to address our social problems,” Bliss said. “You don’t need armed and badged gunmen.”

That structural racism contributes to crime

(<https://denverite.com/2020/06/08/montbello-leaders-ready-for-a-potentially-violent-summer-fueled-by-inequality-made-worse-by-the-coronavirus/>) has also been discussed during protest in recent weeks.



(<https://i1.wp.com/wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/06/190608-ROSHAN-BLISS-DENVER-JUSTICE-PROJECT-KEVINJBEATY-01.jpg?ssl=1>)

Roshan Bliss poses for a portrait, June 8, 2019. (Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite)

Carleigh Sailon, one of two Mental Health Center of Denver workers who've been riding around in the van taking calls, said she's excited to be a part of that creative way to change how the city deals with crises. Helping people, and finding better ways to do it, are what motivates her.

“I’m in this field because social justice is my passion. Bucking systems that have historically not worked is what I decided I wanted to do,” she said, especially “during this time when there’s just so clearly a movement going on.”

Enter your email address here

Sign me up!

STAR hit the ground running.

Sailon and her colleague, Chris Richardson, have been taking turns working the mental health side of STAR since it launched last Monday. Richardson said they've been very busy.

"The past three days have been just a blur," Richardson said. "It's actually gone incredibly well."

From 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, STAR picks up 911 calls within the downtown "lollipop" area, which is basically a large circle around Civic Center, Capitol Hill and Downtown with a long stem stretching south down Broadway. Bliss said historical 911 call data informed the timing and location choices for this trial period. Richardson said they've since added the National Western Center to its service area, since the city set up a makeshift homeless shelter there as it sought to mitigate COVID-19 (<https://denverite.com/2020/04/08/just-looking-at-the-national-western-emergency-shelter-puts-denvers-housing-crisis-into-perspective/>).

Many of the cases Richardson and Sailon take involve people living in homelessness. Sailon said she helped some people in shelters dealing with suicidal thoughts and people on the street wrestling with substance abuse. Because they're so deeply involved in the city's social-work world, she and Richards can use their networks and knowledge of the system to connect people directly with case managers or other resources. They'll even give people a ride to wherever they need to go.

They can navigate the city's mental health landscape more quickly than police officers can, Richardson said, while also spending more time to make sure people get what they need.

"We have time on our side to see what's really going on to make sure that person is connected," he said. "It's the idea of being able to provide the right resource at the right time."

Richardson and Sailon have helped operate the Mental Health Center of Denver's co-responder program (<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdhs/co-responder-programs>), which embeds social workers with police officers to help cops navigate tricky situations. STAR goes one step further.

**In search of Denver news?
Get it sent right to your inbox! Sign up
for our free, useful and delightful
newsletter today!**

Sign me up!



(<https://i1.wp.com/wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/06/200608-STAR-POLICE-911-DIVERSION-PROGRAM-MENTAL-HEALTH-CENTER-OF-DENVER-KEVINJBEATY-05.jpg?ssl=1>)

Chris Richardson and Carleigh Sailon with the Mental Health Center of Denver (left and right) and Spencer Lee, a Denver Health paramedic, stand in front of the Support Team Assisted Response's new van. June 8, 2020. (Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite)

The number of unhoused patients they've seen so far is partially influenced by the service area they're working.

"Policing has always been about keeping down marginalized people, from its origins, and that has included Black folks and other folks not considered 'white' and poor people," Bliss said. "You can't have racial justice without economic justice."

The fact that Pazen helped green light the project, Richardson says, shows DPE leadership is committed to morphing the department into a more modern organization.

"I think Denver is doing a lot of steps to change the culture, change their approach," Richardson said. "They want to move to a 21st-century policing model."

Bliss hopes STAR can grow, treating the symptoms of systemic problems while the city deals with some root causes.

In search of Denver news?
Get it sent right to your inbox! Sign up
for our free, useful and delightful
newsletter today!

Enter your email address here...

Sign me up!

He'd like to see 15 or 20 vans doing this kind of work across the whole city, each with a different service area that caters to a neighborhood's specific needs. A van on the west side, for instance, might employ bilingual EMTs and mental health staff.

In the next six months, Richardson and Sailon will work to identify ways in which the program needs to be tweaked, while they, Bliss and other interested parties try to drum up data on how things are going.

Bliss said the next step would involve a request for proposals. He hopes a community organization steps up to own the project for the long haul, like has happened in Eugene, while taxpayer dollars help fund it.

An existing network of street medics (<https://denverite.com/2020/06/02/small-clinics-have-popped-up-in-capitol-hill-for-protesters-with-tear-gas-in-their-eyes/>) and community service providers, like the Denver Alliance for Street Health Response (<https://dashrco.org/>) (DASHR), helped advocate for the pilot and are working to make sure it can grow.

In a prepared statement (<http://www.denverjusticeproject.org/2020/06/08/press-release-alternative-public-health-emergency-response-pilot-launches-in-denver/>), DASHR's Vinnie Cervantes said supporters "insist that a program like this must be community-owned and led."

Many of these people are working on a volunteer basis to make it happen.

Bliss, for instance, has a day job helping run the nonprofit Project VOYCE (<https://www.projectvoyce.org/>). He works on STAR, he said, "doing what is right in my copious free time."

As he thinks about minimizing damage to communities at the hands of police, he's hoping for some big changes. Not all are new ideas.

"To abolish police we need serious affordable housing. We need food programs," he said. "We need to address the causes of inequality, poverty and suffering and create ways communities can support themselves in dealing with hard things."

**In search of Denver news?
Get it sent right to your inbox! Sign up
for our free, useful and delightful
newsletter today!**

Correction: Our original story misspelled Chris Richardson's last name. We fixed the error.



Denverite is powered by [Colorado Public Radio](#)
Copyright © 2020 [Colorado Public Radio](#)

Sign me up!