



Diverting People with Substance Use Disorders from Jail and Prison: An Introduction

Alcohol and drug problems, also called substance use disorders, are costly for our communities, our health system and our criminal justice system. Locking people up for non-violent crimes related to drug and alcohol issues is overcrowding our jails and prisons and failing to reduce addiction. **Smart investments in health and social services through a “diversion” program are a more cost-effective way to help people achieve healthier lives.**

Diversion programs create an alternative path for people who are at risk of arrest or incarceration. Instead of going to jail, people are diverted to a broad range of coordinated services, from housing supports to counseling to treatment for mental illness and substance use. In contrast to post-trial programs like [drug courts](#), diverting people earlier helps them avoid criminal records that can cause lasting harm, such as inability to obtain jobs, housing and stable family relationships.

Two earlier diversion options are:

- **Pre-booking diversion:** enrollment in a diversion program occurs after an arrest but before a person has been officially “booked,” or processed, for the arrest. The most prominent pre-booking diversion model is [Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion \(LEAD\)](#).
- **Pre-arrest diversion:** referral to diversion programs through community outreach before a person gets into trouble. Proactive community outreach is an approach already used by many health and social service organizations, but these programs are often narrowly focused. In a pre-arrest diversion program outreach may be done by front line police officers or by outreach workers who connect individuals with the full range of services they need to avoid arrest.

Four elements are critical to building effective diversion programs:

- **[Meet people where they’re at](#).** No matter what stage they’re in on their journey to improved health and reduction of risky behaviors, diversion participants need support. In many cases, changes in healthy behaviors will be gradual.
- **Help people navigate a full continuum of services.** Connections to and engagement with diversion services should be facilitated by a coordinator who acts as a point person.
- **[Promote cultural understanding](#).** Law enforcement and service providers interacting with diversion participants should be trained to respectfully support people from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- **Bring together community partners.** Having stakeholders with many perspectives at the table during planning and implementation will help ensure the diversion program fits the community’s needs. For example, law enforcement, health and social service providers, community leaders, and potential program participants all have something important to contribute.