



Promising Practices for Pre-Arrest Diversion Programs

Locking people up for non-violent crimes fails to reduce addiction or prevent substance use disorders, and simultaneously overcrowds our jails and prisons. Pre-arrest diversion programs are a more effective way to help people achieve healthier lives and reduce incarceration by directing individuals to a range of coordinated service that incorporate health and social services. Through meeting people where they are at, pre-arrest diversion programs support people at [every stage](#) in their journey to recovery.

This resource describes promising practices for creating effective pre-arrest diversion programs. While all these practices are important to consider at the outset, some can be added over time as program resources and capacity grows. Local community needs may also dictate other program elements. (For promising [police protocols](#), please see this resource from Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion.)

Provide case management across a full continuum of services

This is the most pivotal operational component of pre-arrest diversion programs. Diversion programs must take into account the immediate and long-term needs for health services, and social and economic supports to help keep individuals out of the criminal justice system. Through comprehensive [case management](#), focused on navigation, participants can access resources across the continuum of services tailored to their needs.

The necessary [continuum of services](#) includes: Emergency services, housing, harm reduction, legal services, access to food, recovery supports, education and employment. Programs typically provide some services directly and refer people to other services.

Practice anti-racism and strive toward cultural humility

Pre-arrest diversion programs should ensure they do not perpetuate the racism of the War on Drugs, where many people of color were jailed while most white people were given treatment. Programs should ensure they are serving participants in communities hardest hit by the War on Drugs, and empowering members of those communities to help lead the programs.

In addition, program leaders, law enforcement and service providers should respectfully support people from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Achieving this typically requires providing training in cultural awareness and implicit bias to staff working in diversion programs. Programs should provide information in the languages spoken in their community, and should consider using [recovery centered language](#) in materials.

The Atlanta/Fulton County Pre-Arrest Diversion program is an exemplary model on how to incorporate cultural awareness throughout implementation. Their search for a primary service partner – the agency that will hire and train their care navigators – is strictly limited to a partner that will demonstrate cultural

humility through respectful work with diverse participants. This includes, but is not limited to, working with: underserved and marginalized populations, formerly incarcerated people, sex workers, immigrant and refugee populations, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA identified people.

Find anti-racism resources at: [YWCA](#), [Crossroads Anti-Racism Organization](#) and [Race Forward](#)

Meaningfully engage people with lived experiences in planning, implementation

People with lived experiences of arrest, incarceration, re-entry, sex work, battling substance use disorders and/or managing the road to recovery provide critical information about their concerns, their needs, the service gaps, and the tools and coaching that are essential in attracting and serving participants in a pre-arrest diversion program. Engaging community members with lived experience in planning and operation improves program design, increases community buy-in and trust, reduces costs and enhances success.

Strategies for [meaningful engagement](#) include establishing a participant advisory committee, having consumers in program leadership roles, and having mechanisms for participants to give official and unofficial feedback to the pre-arrest program.

Build a diverse coalition by bringing together community partners

Bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders to the planning and implementation stages benefits both the longevity and efficiency of pre-arrest diversion programs. Drawing on the strengths and connections of coalition partners increases negotiating power and resources. Ideally, health and social service providers, reentry organizations, faith-based organizations, law enforcement, LGBTQIA groups, housing organizations, local businesses, municipal officials and others are working together to meet the unique needs of their community.

[Steps for building a diverse coalition](#) include creating a coalition framework that reflects your community's needs, strategic recruitment, developing goals and operating guidelines, organizing working committees, developing effective messaging, and being prepared for wins and losses.

Diversify financing to achieve sustainability

No single source will likely be sufficient to fund an entire pre-arrest diversion program's service and operational needs year after year. Communities planning diversion programs should look at the target populations that will be reached, evaluate the local landscape for existing resources and gaps, and then attempt to thread together multiple funding mechanisms to create a long-term funding plan.

[Potential revenue streams](#) needed to finance pre-arrest diversion programs can include Medicaid, adapted Medicaid models, federal, state and local funding, health institutions, and private/philanthropic funding.

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