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Charlottesville to establish mental health crisis task force



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Lloyd Snook announces the mental health crisis response task force on Sept. 21, 2020.

Credit: Screenshot

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The calls for criminal justice reform that have echoed throughout the nation this summer have intersected locally with mental health and crisis response.

Mental health advocate Myra Anderson's persistence has now resulted in the forthcoming creation of a task force charged with examining what model of crisis response may

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At the Sept. 21 City Council meeting, Councilor Lloyd Snook announced that Councilor Sena Magill and he would like to establish a mental health crisis response task force. He proposed that he and Magill would be the council representatives and that Anderson would be on the task force.

Anderson said she is pleased that her idea for a task force is coming to fruition and calls it a “first step” to addressing mental health crises, without necessarily involving law enforcement.

“I’ve been exchanging a lot of emails and making public comments because I think it’s important,” Anderson explained.

She noted that the task force’s work to examine alternate responses to mental health crises can be “life changing.” Anderson said the group can explore different models in communities across the United States and monitor the proposed “Marcus Alert” legislation in Virginia’s General Assembly — legislation that stemmed from the 2018 killing by law enforcement of Richmond resident Marcus-David Peters in the midst of a mental health crisis.

“People are going to get support they need, that’s really what it’s all about,” Anderson said.

As organizational and outreach efforts are underway, more concrete details are still forthcoming.



Myra Anderson, top, center, celebrates an art installation featuring various Charlottesville activists in the summer of 2019.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods / Charlottesville Tomorrow

“We hope to have more details on that in a couple of weeks, but I just wanted to let folks know that that is an initiative that we’re going to start,” Snook said in the recent council meeting. “I’ve heard a number of people talking about that over the last few months in Charlottesville and elsewhere, and we’re going to be moving forward on that.”

According to Anderson, current discussions around the task force indicate that it could be composed of 10 people.

“Everyone who is a stakeholder in mental health will have a seat on this task force,” Anderson said.

During the council meeting, Snook explained that there would be “input from the police department and various emergency responders, mental health professionals and mental health advocates.”

“I would hope that we could come up with a plan that might lead to recommendations for the budgets for the police department and other emergency responders in the coming year,” he later wrote in an email to Charlottesville Tomorrow.

Meanwhile, Anderson has already provided a list of individuals and organizations to council for consideration. She added that it is important to be composed not just of representatives of organizations and agencies, but people who have lived experiences of mental health conditions that can speak to what types of crisis response may work best.

Anderson spent the summer advocating for a task force after a director at Region Ten Community Service Board suggested the idea of a mobile crisis unit of clinicians in July. [The idea was first raised in a July 16 Charlottesville Tomorrow article.](#) Though the goal of the suggestion was to limit or eliminate the need for law enforcement officers’ presence in situations where community members say they are not the ideal responders, Anderson expressed reservations for Region Ten if they were to spearhead such a proposal.

Anderson’s caution stemmed from her experience working with and receiving services from Region Ten. After complaints about treatment to include a lack of racial awareness, the Virginia Human Rights Committee ruled that Region Ten had prevented her from receiving services in retaliation.

Since the ruling, Region Ten has attended racial and cultural training sessions and its executive director, Lisa Beitz, stated that it will “continue to listen to the critical needs and gaps in services” and that it will “partner with the community to respond accordingly.”

While the task force is not completely formalized, Anderson is positive that Region Ten will be involved. While their involvement “does not remove any critique” Anderson has of the organization, she asserts that they are important to the conversation— especially as they currently collaborate with law enforcement for existing crisis responses.

“I think not having [Region Ten] at the table wouldn’t be of benefit of what we’re trying to do. They may have vital information to give,” Anderson explained. “What I’ve learned is that sometimes the issue at hand requires you to put things by the side if it’s going to benefit the greater community.”

As concrete details come together ahead of the task force’s official meetings, Anderson said she is pushing for it to be composed not just of diversity in skin color, but in terms of those who offer and those who receive services.

“It looks very different when you’re sitting on the side of the person who is delivering the service to what it feels like to receive that—to what it feels like to have had cops show up at your house,” Anderson explained.

Once the group is assembled, Anderson will represent her organization Brave Souls on Fire, which has a focus on Black mental health. The personal connection as someone who has a lived experience receiving mental health care and crisis response makes the work even more meaningful to her.

“This is important to me because not only am I an advocate but I’m someone who struggles and understands,” Anderson said. “If I’m creating something right now, it’s for the benefit of the community, but might engage myself, it makes me even more passionate.”



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Region Ten director suggests community mobile crisis service to respond to some 911 calls instead of police



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7 MIN READ
Thursday, July 16, 2020, at 7:18 PM



A screenshot from body cam footage released by Charlottesville Police Department.

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On July 8, a [911 call was placed regarding a man](#) lying on the ground of the Charlottesville Downtown Mall. Responders included the city's fire and police departments, as well as the Charlottesville-Albemarle Rescue Squad. Within the duration of a 17-minute recording released via the police officer's body camera, the man was arrested. His crime? Public intoxication, and later, obstruction of justice and assaulting an officer. The man, 36-year-old Christopher Lee Gonzales, has no fixed residence and, according to the [Virginia Judiciary Online Case Information System](#), has accumulated previous public intoxication charges in Charlottesville, Albemarle County and Virginia Beach.

In recent months, activists and officials alike have acknowledged that law enforcement officers might not always be the best first responders to situations that could be handled by or with support from mental health experts or social workers. The idea, activists say, fits into calls for [defunding police departments](#) — a proposal that ranges from dismantling and creating something new to divesting funds from law enforcement into social programs and organizations.

Meanwhile, one such social organization that has a history of collaborating with crisis-trained law enforcement officers could bring a new type of response model into the community.

Lori Wood, director of emergency and short term stabilization services at Region Ten Community Service Board suggests a mobile crisis service that could be deployed with or in place of law enforcement for some calls related to mental health or substance abuse.

“If we[the community] had mobile clinicians who we could deploy along with the police to be able to respond, or in place of the police in some cases, then we could do a better job of being able to respond in that moment ... and have it be a multidisciplinary approach,” Wood explained. “If the police need to be there, OK, but if you don’t have a history of violence or any need for that kind of intervention, ... then we [the community] could have an alternate way for you to get help in that moment that’s not ‘Well, we’ve got to wait until tomorrow when the clinic is open.’”

According to a city of Charlottesville press release, the initial call regarding Gonzales was placed because he had been lying on the Downtown Mall. Charlottesville Tomorrow requested the recording of the call through a Freedom of Information Act Request but the regional emergency communications center denied it, citing state code that makes it exempt due to it being part of a criminal investigative file.

Gonzales, whose last name in some court records is spelled Gonzalez, was awakened and interacted with the first responders — the first of which to arrive and who assumed control of the situation was a Charlottesville Police Department officer.

Though the responding officer’s body camera detached during their interactions, [a video posted to Instagram](#) by a bystander on the mall shows some of what the body camera did not. There is a gap from when the officer’s camera fell to the ground and the Instagram footage began that was during the time when Gonzales allegedly resisted arrest. The Instagram footage shows the officer kicking Gonzales before pinning him to the ground in what appears to be a chokehold as he awaited more officers. Other first responders had already been dismissed.

As conversations surrounding police and crisis response reform have been underway between activists and officials, Charlottesville Police Chief RaShall Brackney has spoken in favor of what she calls “decoupling” police departments.

During a June Albemarle-Charlottesville NAACP event, she said police officers should not be responsible for responding to societal issues like homelessness and mental health.

“We keep criminalizing social ills,” Brackney said at the online event. “You make officers social workers with guns and handcuffs. The less likely you are to have police intervention, the less likely you are to have a bad outcome.”

Charlottesville Tomorrow asked Brackney about how CPD could collaborate with or support a potential mobile crisis service, but a response was not received at the time of this publication.

Since 2006, Charlottesville has been part of the Thomas Jefferson Area Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), which includes training police officers on how to work with people who exhibit signs of mental illness or substance abuse. Training is also available to the Charlottesville Albemarle Regional Jail, the Central Virginia Regional Jail and 911 emergency dispatchers.

According to Tom von Hemert, who is the CIT coordinator for the area, the need stems from the number of incarcerated individuals who have mental illness as well as the rates of recidivism for such individuals. He and Wood say that CIT-trained officers can be requested for response calls by Region Ten or a person placing a 911 call

Another task of CIT is to further develop local crisis intervention through a task force composed of various representatives that include various social services like mental health and homelessness.

“Every month, I host what I call the CIT Crisis Review Team. It has literally all those players come together,” von Hemert explained. “We meet once a month and talk about ‘Who are we concerned about? Is it someone we are seeing over and over again? Is it somebody new on the caseload and how can we work closer and better together?’”

Von Hemert, whose office is within those of Region Ten, also said that he thinks “that each service organization — whether it is mental health, law enforcement, medical ... we all work well in our own silos. I think the problem is that we need to get out of that. We need to take a holistic perspective instead of a narrow agency perspective.”

Charlottesville Tomorrow asked city councilors how the idea of a mobile crisis service could be supported by council. Only Sena Magill and Lloyd Snook responded by the time of publication.

Snook said he thinks there is general interest in the idea and recommended the example of the [Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets \(CAHOOTS\)](#) program in Eugene, OR, which operates similarly to what Wood suggests.

“I fully believe that this is something the community should pursue. Policing should not be involved in mental health or social services crises. The training officers get in controlling a situation often escalates the symptoms of mental health (this is why the Crisis Intervention Training was started),” Magill said in an email. “While the majority of officers in the Charlottesville Police department receive CIT training, it is not designed to take the place of a mental health professional’s years of training.”

Magill, who has previously worked for Region Ten, suggests that cultural competency also be included in training.

“Cultural competence is extremely important in mental health, I have seen too many times where one’s cultural beliefs or behaviors or language barriers are misinterpreted by the professional,” Magill explained.

Unlike the formal uniforms of law enforcement officers, Magill also suggests that professionals for a mobile crisis service be dressed casually and “in a manner that signals they are approachable.”

To achieve a mobile crisis service, Magill said the City Council could advocate to the General Assembly and ask that they become a standard part of community service boards or police departments. She also said that the council can play a role in helping financially support such a service but notes the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the economy at present.

“I am very cautious about taking on new expenditures when we need to be planning to help people keep their homes and children safe and learning,” Magill explained.

In the meantime, Gonzales’ next hearing date is scheduled for September and, according to CPD, his case also is currently under an internal affairs investigation.



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Snook: Police Department a 'black box;' council can't discuss 'defunding' until more known about structure, budget



CHARLOTTE RENE WOODS AND JESSIE HIGGINS

8 MIN READ

Monday, June 29, 2020, at 6:37 PM



An organizer wears a protective mask during the Defund the Police Block Party on June 13.

Credit: Mike Kropf/Charlottesville Tomorrow

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As activists call for police department defunding, Charlottesville city leaders say they don't have enough information about the Charlottesville Police Department's structure or budget to even begin having that conversation here.

“My problem as a councilor right now is that the police department is kind of like a black box to us,” Councilor Lloyd Snook said.

“That, most of the time, hasn’t been an issue. But right now, it’s an issue because people are asking us to take some very specific actions that we don’t have the information for.”

In the past weeks, hundreds of protesters have taken to Charlottesville’s streets calling for the police department to be downsized or outright abolished. Meanwhile, local activist groups have demanded city leaders have a meaningful conversation about reforming the department.

Charlottesville Police Chief RaShall Brackney did not respond to requests for comment on the issue.

She has previously spoken in favor of what she calls “decoupling” police departments.

During the June 8 Albemarle-Charlottesville NAACP’s Citizens Conversation with Law Enforcement Officials, she said police officers should not be responsible for responding to societal issues like homelessness and mental health.

“We keep criminalizing social ills,” Brackney said at the online event. “You make officers social workers with guns and handcuffs. The less likely you are to have police intervention, the less likely you are to have a bad outcome.”

On June 18, Charlottesville Tomorrow emailed Brackney, requesting more information about her position. The email included the following four questions:

01.

What does decoupling police mean?

02.

What specific departments or areas of policing that exist within the CPD’s current structure would be decoupled?

03.

What would happen to those departments?

04.

Where would the money for those decoupled departments then be directed?

Brackney did not respond to the email, and shortly after this story first appeared online, a spokesman said that the department declined to comment.

Charlottesville Tomorrow also requested interviews on the topic of defunding police from all five city councilors. Snook gave an interview, Councilor Heather Hill declined to speak on record and Councilor Michael Payne and Mayor Nikuyah Walker did not respond.

Councilor Sena Magill said, “You want to do what is right as best as you can. If we had the magic wand and an exact right answer that we know would work, we would do it.”

And the city’s spokesman, Brian Wheeler, emailed the following statement:

“We believe the city of Charlottesville will always need professionals and resources dedicated to public safety and law enforcement. We expect funding priorities and best practices to be the topic of future

safety and law enforcement. We expect funding priorities and best practices to be the topic of future discussions by Charlottesville City Council.”

Where’s the money going?

But for those discussions to happen, some say the community needs more information about how the department is structured — and how it spends its \$18 million annual budget.

The council needs “to figure out what additional information we need to request from Chief Brackney so that we can get the information we need to even be able to discuss the issues that people want us to be discussing,” Snook said.

In response to multiple requests for the police budget this month, the department has released a series of budget documents, each containing varying levels of detail.

On June 12, it posted to its website a batch of [budgets from the last five years](#). Each budget document contained one to two pages of around 60 to 80 line items. Thirteen of those line items were for salaries and benefits, with more than \$8 million budgeted for “full time salaries.” The remaining line items described broad administrative and operating costs — things like rent, travel and meals.

Local activists were quick to say those documents lack sufficient detail.

“When you ask for that budget, you only have a two-pager, versus if you ask city schools they have a 150-page budget,” said Harold Folley, a community organizer with the Legal Aid Justice Center and The People’s Coalition, a local activist group.

“We need to figure out where that \$18 million is going,” Folley said. “When you talk about defunding or reinvesting, you need to find out what the budget looks like. You don’t want to cut the wrong things.”

Folley sent a letter on behalf of The People’s Coalition to the city council and to City Manager Tarron Richardson on June 19 asking for a more comprehensive and programmatic budget to be released.

If the city lacks such a budget, it should demand it be produced by the police department, the letter said.

Meanwhile, on June 16, Charlottesville resident Matthew Gilikin requested a [budget that contained more details](#), including individual police officer salaries, which the department sent him on Thursday.

The department then on Friday sent The People’s Coalition a different three-page categorized budget for the fiscal year 2021 that contained 85 line items. [That budget was similar to the ones the department posted to its website on June 12, though it broke down some broad topics — like training and equipment — into more specific subcategories.](#)

Folley said none of the budgets released thus far contain the information he’s looking for.

“It’s not about who is getting paid,” Folley said. “It’s what services could be cut that they really are not in the business of doing. If it’s not public safety, can it be put into housing, youth programs or mental health to make those programs sustainable.”

This issue is not unique to Charlottesville, said Jesse Jannetta, a senior policy fellow at the Urban Institute’s Justice Policy Center, a nonprofit economic and social policy research institute based on Washington, D.C.

“One of the top challenges often when you look at budgets is there are lines for things like personnel and equipment,” Jannetta said. “These are very broad budget categories. When you’re thinking about redirecting resources, or you’re thinking about taking specific action, it can be very hard to determine from these broad categories what to cut.”

Jannetta recommends communities interested in downsizing their police departments begin the conversation by determining what they want to fund rather than what they want to cut

conversation by determining what they want to fund, rather than what they want to cut.

“The question should be, what do we want to create?” he said. “What do we want to have that we don’t have now? Then, you walk that over to the police budget.”

‘Time to have this discussion is now’

Councilor Snook is calling for the community — and the council — to have defunding conversations now to give the city time to include any changes in next year’s budget.

Typically, the city holds budget work sessions through the winter before adopting a final budget in the spring.

There is a lot to work out before that process begins, he said.

“Some people think that ‘defund’ means abolish and some people think that ‘defund’ means just take some of the money and put it in other places,” Snook said. “There’s not really a clear agreement on what the term means.”

Some local protesters have called for the outright abolition of Charlottesville police. Hundreds filled the intersection of Barracks Road and Emmet Street on June 13 with that message at the Defund the Police Block Party.

Organizers of the event said police officers should be entirely replaced by other types of trained personnel.

“This means that instead of calling the police when someone is going through a mental health crisis, we call a trained social worker to aid in their care,” said Althea Laughon-Worrell, a Virginia Commonwealth University student and Charlottesville High School graduate, who helped organize the event.

“Instead of calling the police to talk down a violent offender you call someone who is trained to de-escalate the situation rather than respond with more violence.”

Laughon-Worrell said there needs to be a more constructive approach in responding to emergency calls.

“Police are trained in criminalization, but we are asking for public safety teams trained in community care,” Laughon-Worrell said. “Community care is supporting each other rather than punishing each other.”

She would like to see funding that has gone toward law enforcement be redirected into community programs or organizations.

The People’s Coalition’s Folley echoed some of Laughon-Worrell’s points. He said to think about defunding as reinvesting.

He cited the Charlottesville School Board’s decision to [remove school resource officers from city schools](#) as an example. The school district may be able to redirect that money elsewhere.

That’s something former Charlottesville City Councilor Wes Bellamy, who served from 2015 to 2019, has experience with.

As a councilor, Bellamy worked to reallocate funds for projects during his tenure. He said there’s a way that divesting police funding and relocating it to other things is possible in Charlottesville.

“It’s something that’s doable if there’s a political will,” Bellamy said. “I think in a time like now, we have to challenge ourselves to do so. There’s no reason, in my personal opinion, that we can’t look at even shaving 2%-5% of the city’s budget or the police budget if we wanted to start small.”