

The background of the entire page is a dark, out-of-focus photograph of police lights. The lights are in shades of red, white, and blue, creating a bokeh effect with soft, glowing circles. The overall mood is somber and urgent.

Public Safety and Health and Human Services

How a Midwestern City Took a Hard Sociological
Look Following Police-Involved Shootings

By Jamie Tester Morfoot and Daniel Pollack



In the aftermath of a police-involved shooting, do social services agencies consider their role in the events prior to the shooting? Not immediately prior, but the preceding 364 days prior to the shooting?

This is what Eau Claire County, WI, set out to do. By western Wisconsin standards, Eau Claire is “the city,” reporting a population of approximately 70,000—92.1 percent of whom identify as Caucasian. The median income is just under \$52,000. It is home to three major medical facilities and three institutions of higher education. Nestled in the heart of the Chippewa River Valley, it is surrounded by small, rural farming communities.

During 2017, police officers shot and killed three people in Eau Claire County. At that time, Eau Claire Police Chief Jerry Staniszewski discussed how the complexity around police officers responding to a call had changed. One of the things Staniszewski noted was the lack of mental health services.¹

In August 2020 the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors published a series of briefs titled, “Beyond Beds: Crisis Services.” In the brief, *Cops, Clinicians, or Both? Collaborative Approaches to Responding to Behavioral Health Emergencies*, it was noted that individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis (mental illness or substance use disorder) account for more than 2 million jail bookings each year. This places individuals in an environment ill-equipped to provide the services needed to address a multiplicity of underlying concerns.

History of Commitment

In 2006, the Eau Claire County Board passed a resolution to create a Criminal Justice Collaborating Council (CJCC), and in 2008 hired a director to coordinate associated programming. The CJCC’s intent was to enhance public safety through

community collaboration, coordinated leadership, and innovative criminal justice programs.² By creating a multidisciplinary coalition, Eau Claire County began to examine how to better provide services to citizens interacting with the criminal justice system. The CJCC membership includes 13 elected and appointed leaders in the criminal justice system and three citizen members. All circuit court judges are members, and except for the Presiding Judge, are nonvoting.

In 2010, Eau Claire County implemented evidence-based decision making (EBDM) in its criminal justice system. The goal was to build a system-wide framework (from an arrest through final disposition and discharge) that would create a more collaborative approach to practice. EBDM is used to equip policymakers with the information, processes, and tools needed to reduce pre-trial misconduct and post-conviction recidivism.³

Five years later, in 2015, the Stepping Up Initiative was launched. As a partnership between the National Association of Counties, the Council of State Governments Justice Center, and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation, the Stepping Up Initiative focused on reducing the number of adults with mental illnesses and co-occurring substance use disorders in jails.⁴

Following the three shootings in 2017, leadership struggled to pinpoint a single cause for each incident leading city and county leaders to want to dig deeper. With an already established group of system leaders through the CJCC and Stepping Up, the group decided to shift its focus.

The Review Process

A neutral third party was secured to assist the group. The first task was to flush out what the group envisioned for a process they were calling a psychological autopsy. The second was to facilitate a conversation around the challenging topic.

When the new group met for the first time, representation at the table consisted of 10 individuals holding leadership positions or the actual position in the following departments: Corporation Counsel’s Office, Public

Defender’s Office, Director and Deputy Director of Human Services (DHS), EC Police Department, EC Sheriff’s Department, EC County Jail, CJCC Manager, a community mental health provider, and a university faculty member as the facilitator. The group was well-versed in service evaluation by population, but analyzing services received by a specific individual was new territory.

Through facilitated discussion, the group expressed wanting to uncover where the systems might have failed those involved in the shootings. The status of each of the cases was reviewed individually. There was only one that was closed with no pending litigation. It was decided that the group would examine this shooting victim’s life for the 364 days prior to the shooting. There would be no discussion of the day of the incident. Instead, the group wanted to focus on how many times in the year preceding the individual’s death had there been touch points with a human service-providing system. It should be noted that discussion of whether to include the victim’s family, or other community members, was considered. After reflection, it was determined that for the service-providing systems to be able to be open and transparent about their processes and decisions, and not re-traumatize the family members, it would be more appropriate to have the process closed to community participation.

Over the course of the next six months, the group blocked off three meeting times of four hours each. Each system entity brought requested records relevant to their system. For example, the group did not include a representative from the State Adult Mental Health Facility. The DHS representatives requested documents from these entities. The group combed through case notes, police reports and 911 calls, jail booking and discharge dates, eviction notices, and public health or housing officials’ contact notes to determine touch points with public and private service providers. HIPAA regulations made this most challenging.

The process was tedious and intensive. At the end of each meeting the facilitator would assist the group in identifying gaps in the timeline where



Jamie Tester Morfoot is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire’s Social Work Department. She can be reached at testerja@uwec.edu.



Daniel Pollack is a professor at Yeshiva University’s School of Social Work in New York City. He can be reached at dpollack@yu.edu.

By reframing gaps in service as a community issue, instead of just individual government system issues, the human services provider leadership is striving to create better outcomes for all Eau Claire community members.

information was still needed. Between meetings, group members would look for records that would provide insight into the individual's whereabouts during each gap. Filling those holes in the victim's whereabouts was where each meeting would start. The end result was a year's timeline of events and contacts.

At the final meeting, the group examined the full 364 days of service provider contacts. It was only at this point that the group shifted its approach back to forward thinking. It identified touch points where a missed opportunity for intervention or alternative outcomes might have occurred. By examining one individual's experiences with service systems, the group began to discuss what could be controlled at a local level.

Local System Changes

Following the final meeting, Eau Claire County began implementing changes in how services are provided. The first change was to share information across systems. The DHS worked closely with law enforcement to create a mental health flag that community members can opt into. A community member working with an EC County Comprehensive Community Services (CCS) Case Manager can now complete paperwork and a release of information allowing police access to the person's mental health history and diagnosis when responding to a call involving that individual. To assist with response to these calls, a Co-Response Coordinator position was created and hired in July 2021. Now, a mental health professional is part of the responding police team when calls involve individuals

experiencing mental health or substance abuse crises.


In 2017, the Eau Claire County Jail had added mental health services. A result of the psychological autopsy was that it added additional hours in 2019. In a collaboration between EC DHS and the EC County Jail, a Jail Reentry Diversion social worker was hired in May 2021 to bridge the services between the jail and the DHS CCS Program. The social worker assists inmates with program enrollment and establishes a case manager prior to release. The jail has also begun conducting mental health screenings for all bookings within the first 24 hours.

The EC County Treatment Courts have redefined the term "predatory drug dealer" and eliminated the prior criteria of having all pending charges in other counties resolved prior to admission. These steps make treatment courts more accessible to people with dual diagnoses fighting addiction. The court system continues to explore ways to expand admissions guidelines related to "violence exclusion" policies, as they may disproportionately impact individuals identifying as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color.

Two community components identified during the psychological autopsy were (1) timely access to mental health services, and (2) lack of stable housing. In November 2018, the Eau Claire County DHS opened a Free Mental Health Clinic. Since its inception, approximately 700 individuals have been referred, with 560 establishing care. It is estimated that 20 percent of those who establish care are uninsured. The clinic currently has three therapists included in its budget,

with another currently in place as a limited-term employee. The clinic will be advocating for two additional therapists to be added in the 2022 budget.

Access to affordable housing is a more challenging and long-term strategic planning community concern. With three medical facilities and three institutions of higher education, rental properties are at a premium. Most landlords successfully require tenants to sign a lease a full year in advance. Engagement with community stakeholders and advocacy groups has been underway, with increased challenges and delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Eau Claire currently offers one single adult shelter capable of housing 52 individual adults, a family shelter that can house up to six families, and a domestic violence shelter that offers 17 rooms and six transitional housing units. However, these services barely scratch the surface of the level of need with 10.6 percent of Eau Claire residents reportedly living in poverty; and the only daytime shelter closed during the last year.

By embracing the uncomfortable conversations around how service systems may have failed an individual, Eau Claire County has implemented changes resulting in improved outcomes for its citizens in need of additional supports. By reframing gaps in service as a community issue, instead of just individual government system issues, the human services provider leadership is striving to create better outcomes for all Eau Claire community members. 

Reference Notes

1. Dirr, A. (2017, October 9). Police killed more people in Wisconsin than in past years: Analysis. Post Crescent. <https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2017/10/09/fatal-police-shootings-rise-wisconsin-and-no-ones-sure-why/692779001>
2. Eau Claire County (n.d.). Public safety & courts: Criminal justice collaborating council. <https://www.co.eau-claire.wi.us/public-safety-courts/cjcc>
3. Eau Claire County (n.d.). Public safety and courts: Evidence based decision making (EBDM). <https://www.co.eau-claire.wi.us/public-safety-courts/cjcc/evidence-based-decision-making-ebdm>
4. CSG Justice Center (2015–2021). The stepping up initiative. <https://stepuptogether.org>