

Collaboration Between Law Enforcement and Crisis Stabilization Unit Employees

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When law enforcement brings an individual to a crisis stabilization unit (CSU), it requires collaboration between the officer and CSU staff. This collaboration is necessary to share critical information related to the person police are transporting to the CSU's care. Based upon our research studying how police use CSUs and collaborate with mental health professionals across four counties in a Southeastern region of the United States, we learned several factors that can enhance this working relationship.

Crisis Stabilization Unit Staff Perspective

| **Facilitators:** CSU staff mainly report two facilitators to their working relationship with law enforcement: (1) help during the check-in process and (2) help if the individual's behavior escalates or if they are threatening staff or other patients.

| **Help During Check In:** Police help CSU staff during the check-in process by checking the individuals for safety concerns such as unsafe objects or items the individual could use as a weapon. CSU staff suggest this helps makes them feel safe and the CSU safer for everyone.

"Most of the agencies are really good about [helping us] . . . When they come in, I'll search the client not physically, make sure they take everything out of their pockets, make sure they don't have any belt or strings or anything like that." – CSU Staff Member

| **Help if an Individual's Behavior Escalates:** Police can help CSU staff by assisting them when an individual's behavior escalates, or the individual becomes threatening. Staff say this assistance allows them to stabilize a person to continue providing care to individuals who, without police help, might be too difficult to treat.

"The law enforcement around here is good and they don't say, "Well, it's your job." Because they know they're bringing the clients here, and they know their mental status when they're brought in." – CSU Staff

| **Barriers:** CSU staff report two barriers to their working relationship: (1) police bringing individuals they perceive as inappropriate for CSU care and (2) receiving inaccurate or incomplete paperwork completed by law enforcement.

| **Person Inappropriate for CSU Care:** CSU staff perceive the services should remain reserved for individuals in crisis. However, police sometimes bring other individuals to the CSU that they do not want to arrest but perceive should not be on the street. With limited resources in the area, police bring these individuals to the CSU for care and triage to other services.

“We've had people who want to lure a homeless who just want to find a place to sleep. This is not a homeless shelter, unfortunately. We do have law enforcement who will bring them and try to drop them off but we can't take you in unless you have an actual reason.” – CSU Staff

| Receiving Inaccurate Paperwork: CSU staff explain when they receive paperwork, sometimes it has incorrect information and requires additional work to understand what is accurate. Staff explain this slows down the process and creates additional stress for their already short-staffed work force.

“The name is not spelled correctly, the date is not right, they checked “AM” instead of “PM” or “PM” instead of “AM”. That is an issue with the [form]. We call law enforcement back because we need an original [form], and it has to be accurate.” – CSU Staff Member

CSU expressed other barriers including feeling tension between themselves and officers when they denied an individual admission to the CSU (e.g., when an individual does not have a medical clearance to enter). They also expressed concern that officers do not always tell individuals they bring to the CSU that they are under an involuntary hold, creating distressed patients when they find out.

Law Enforcement Perspective

| Facilitators: Police overwhelmingly pointed to the sheer existence of the CSU as a positive, stating that having a CSU available as a resource to them 24/7 was extremely helpful.

“Like I said before, I think it's good because it provides an alternative to arrest. If somebody is suffering from a mental health crisis you have that option.” – Officer

“It helps out because we have a resource, literally, in the county that people can go to if they need help with mental health crises.” – Officer

Officers also commented that CSUs are not only an amazing resource for law enforcement, but also a great resource for the greater community as a whole to utilize.

| Barriers: Police reported two main barriers to their working relationship with CSU staff: (1) Inability for individuals to wait inside the CSU while they completed paperwork and (2) Perception CSU release individuals too quickly and without proper care.

| Inability to Wait Inside CSU: The CSUs did not allow individuals to wait inside while police complete the transport and enrollment paperwork. Police explain that people get increasingly

agitated as they wait which only makes it more challenging to complete the paperwork and changes the dynamic when they do enter the CSU.

“My biggest thing would be probably the wait time, because I don't know what this particular person is doing on the computer though. She's just sitting there, I don't know what she's doing. Anyways. It doesn't look like she's busy doing anything, and she'll just make us wait outside.” – Officer

| Perception CSU Staff Release Individuals Too Quickly: Police reported general feelings of frustration or mistrust toward the CSU for not providing what they perceived to be adequate care to individuals officers brought to the facility.

“We as law enforcement officers are sitting here like, “We just took this guy to [CSU agency]. What did [CSU agency] do? . . .We wonder, on our end, is the counseling really being done that needs to be done?” – Officer

Overlap in Concerns

There were multiple areas where mental health professionals and law enforcement shared similar concerns, such as:

- **BEING DUPED BY THE PUBLIC** - Both groups felt “Being duped” by the public or lied to by individuals either trying to get into the CSU or trying to avoid the CSU.
- **ACTING UNKIND** - Both felt as though the other group could offer more sincerity and gentleness to individuals entering the CSU.
- **ACTIONS THAT AMPLIFY EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IN CLIENTS** - Both felt actions by individuals in the other group during the CSU admission process were heightening the emotional distress of civilians.

Improving Collaboration

We asked law enforcement and crisis stabilization unit staff how to improve their working relationship with each other. The four areas they discussed most, included:

More Communication

- Regular communication to law enforcement agencies by CSU leadership about procedure changes and general updates regarding the CSU facility so that law enforcement can efficiently and effectively utilize the resource.
- Create formal procedures for better information sharing when a police officer deflects an individual to the CSU especially under a voluntary transport.

More Information

- Have officers include their phone number on CSU paperwork so they may be easily reached by CSU staff if there are questions.
- Include name and birthdate on paperwork for individuals brought to the CSU especially if they are intoxicated or unable to communicate the information themselves.
- Include contact information for family and friends whose statements or observations influenced the law enforcement decision to bring the person to the CSU under an involuntary hold so that CSU staff can confirm stories.

More Mutual Understanding

- Have CSU staff and law enforcement develop admission procedures that address one another's needs and concerns.
- Have CSU staff conduct follow up communication with officers when individuals they bring to the CSU are rescinded or determined to not fit criteria so that officers can understand why and be prepared to potentially assist this individual in a different way.

More Practical & Educational Material

- Create brief reoccurring cross-training between CSU agencies and law enforcement to enhance skills with paperwork, CSU operation, and mental health knowledge overall.
- Create material that police can easily hand out to the public about the local CSU and mental health agency programs during civilian interaction.

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