



First Responder Deflection: New Jersey's Operation Helping Hand

Catching Up With COSSUP, April 2023

In New Jersey, emergency medical services (EMS) treat approximately 37 overdoses every day. To address this public health issue, Operation Helping Hand (OHH) was created in 2016 by the Bergen County, New Jersey,



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Prosecutor's Office. The prosecutor's office began by focusing on open-air drug markets, quickly offering support and

resources to individuals encountered in these spaces, including connections to recovery resources and mental and primary health care providers. Over the next 5 years, OHH was expanded to every county in New Jersey and each county prosecutor's office was empowered to work with local first responders to create a deflection program to meet its community's specific needs. Because of these efforts, every county in New Jersey now has a first responder deflection initiative.¹

By collaborating with law enforcement agencies to create access to community-based treatment, services, and peer support and other recovery resources, OHH is able "to create a comprehensive team to address not only a quality-of-life issue in the community, but also a health care issue resulting in criminal behavior in the individual."² Moreover, a growing number of sites have created deflection programs under both the First Responder and Officer Referral Pathway and the Officer Intervention Pathway.³ By partnering with prosecutors' offices in addition to law enforcement, an individual's attempts at beginning and maintaining a life in recovery can be taken into account when determining post-arrest decisions and ultimate dispositions of defendants with substance use issues. This process does not represent a "free pass" to get out of the legal system; rather, the goal is to help individuals move toward a recovery-oriented life, particularly through warm handoffs to treatment and connections to community-based resources.

One notable aspect of OHH is its adaptability to various types of communities. In smaller jurisdictions with no noticeable open-air drug markets, peer recovery coaches operate in an "on-call" fashion, engaging "the individual on scene, at a local police station, or at a local hospital to provide an array of services, including access to treatment, or an open line of communication between the person and the recovery coach with the goal of improving the well-being for the person facing addiction and removing barriers to recovery."⁴ In addition to its OHH initiative, in 2018, the Burlington County, New Jersey, Prosecutor's Office began the "Straight . . . to Treatment" program.⁵ In this program, individuals seeking assistance are invited to walk into designated police departments to connect with treatment providers or peer support specialists, who can then make proper connections to treatment.

These deflection programs become even more powerful when paired with training. In response to the growing need for evidence-based training, the New Jersey Department of Health's Office of Emergency Medical Services, in collaboration with Rutgers University, began the "Five Minutes to Help" program.⁶ This program offered the first EMS and law enforcement training of its type in the country. Five Minutes to Help seeks to equip New Jersey's first responders with the knowledge and communication skills to use on the scene, post-overdose reversal, to facilitate connections between the individual and community resources.

Extremely popular among first responders, the Five Minutes to Help program has trained more than 150 certified instructors since its launch in 2019. In addition, more than 550 EMS providers have participated in Five Minutes to Help to learn communication skills such as motivational interviewing. By providing a safe space to help practitioners feel comfortable speaking their minds, Five Minutes to Help has helped change the way first responders interact with people who use substances, helping to confront the stigma associated with substance use disorder. The Five Minutes to Help Program has also now begun to reach not only emergency medical

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professionals but law enforcement and fire professionals seeking tools to engage people who use substances no matter where they may be in the stages of change, another concept taught in the course.

With these three programs, the state of New Jersey has seen a reduction in criminal activity associated with substance use in the communities in which these programs run. Expanding OHH to serve all 21 counties in New Jersey has helped countless individuals access resources and move toward recovery.

For more information on these and other deflection programs operating in New Jersey, please visit <https://www.njoag.gov/programs/nj-cares/operation-helping-hand/>.

Endnotes

1. Deflection is the practice by which law enforcement officers and other first responders (fire, EMS) connect people to community-based treatment and/or services, moving people away from the justice system and emergency resources. This is also known as pre-arrest diversion. For more information on the Six Pathways of Deflection, visit the [Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program \(COSSAP\) Resource Center](#) (transitioning soon to the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program [COSSUP] Resource Center).
2. Remy, Joseph Daniel, Melissa Ann O'Mara, Colleen McKay Wharton, and Timothy Seplaki, October 2021, "Changing Minds to End the Opioid Epidemic: Using Meaningful Conversations and Partnerships to Facilitate Rehabilitation and Recovery," *Police Chief* magazine, <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/changing-minds-to-end-the-opioid-epidemic/>.
3. Learn more about the Officer Intervention Pathway of Deflection in the COSSUP Pathways to Deflection Case Study Series, https://www.cossapresources.org/Content/Documents/Articles/Pathways_to_Diversion_Case_Studies_Series_Officer_Intervention.pdf.
4. See note 2 above, Remy et al., "Changing Minds to End the Opioid Epidemic: Using Meaningful Conversations and Partnerships to Facilitate Rehabilitation and Recovery."
5. For more information on the Burlington County Prosecutor's Office's Straight . . . to Treatment program, visit <https://burlpros.org/straight-to-treatment-addiction-treatment-program-begins-next-week-in-burlington-city>.
6. For more information on New Jersey's Five Minutes to Help program, visit <https://rutgerstraining.sph.rutgers.edu/Fiveminutes/>.