

# Firefighters and Diversion: Spotlight on Arlington County (Virginia)

Catching Up With COSSAP, February 2021

*In this article, TASC's Center for Health and Justice worked with its partner, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), to highlight the important role fire departments can play in first responder-led diversion initiatives. The article below profiles a countywide approach in Arlington County, Virginia, to address opioid, stimulant, and substance use challenges facing this urban county and how the collaboration of multiple partners, including fire/emergency management services (EMS), is necessary to stem the tide of drug use. More information about the initiative is available from a December 2020 webinar that can be found at <https://iir.adobeconnect.com/ph4wddn6mikg/>.*

Arlington County, Virginia, is located in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, just southwest of the District across the Potomac River. Geographically, it is the smallest county in the United States (26 square miles) and among the

most densely populated, with about 238,000 residents and nearly that many commuting to Washington daily. In the past three years, Arlington's fire department has averaged more than 600 overdose calls for service annually. Because of this persistent problem, the county has coordinated a collaborative government response system supported by Arlington political leaders.

Through this system, county services are coordinated by the Arlington Addiction Recovery Initiative (ARI), a collaborative formed in 2017. ARI's goals are clear: They include reducing barriers to accessing treatment, providing diversion to keep individuals from entering the justice system and facilitating needed treatment, coordinating communitywide prevention and education campaigns (including public service announcements), distributing Narcan through the



# Firefighters and Diversion: Spotlight on Arlington County (Virginia)

Catching Up With COSSAP, February 2021

police force to prevent overdose deaths, and offering training on substance use disorders for community groups, as well as peer overdose outreach following overdoses.

Services coordinated by ARI include human resources, sheriff's department, and Commonwealth Attorney functions; same-day access through the sheriff's department for all intakes; a range of outpatient services; and group as well as individual therapy (provided through the county's Behavioral Healthcare Division). The sheriff's program provides office-based opioid treatment that combines medication and therapy. A regional partner from nearby Alexandria, Virginia, provides contracted methadone treatment and an intensive outpatient program with a minimum of nine treatment hours weekly. Alexandria provides a high-intensity residential service and clinically managed low-intensity residential services for sober living. A medical withdrawal management program is locally administered.

The Arlington County Fire Department has been proactive in addressing the opioid crisis through its designated advanced practice officers, or APOs, who have been specially trained in crisis intervention and engagement to intervene with individuals following an overdose to connect them to community-based services. These officers have extensive knowledge of the treatment and social service resources in the community and have developed partnerships that enable them to facilitate referrals, having thus far linked 67 individuals to services following overdose. In addition to the APOs, the county fire department maintains an intoxicated persons protocol that enables fire department staff members to allow the release of an intoxicated person to a responsible party rather than having to call for further law enforcement action.

In 2021, the county will move to a "Safe Station" program format to extend its compassionate response to the opioid crisis. This initiative will provide stigma-free community support for those who seek it.

Through partnerships such as Arlington County's, fire and EMS departments can provide critical initial medical evaluation and triage and instantly direct an individual in need of treatment to the right organization. Indeed, collaboration between police and fire stations in any jurisdiction can have far-reaching effects, including through Safe Station initiatives that allow community members fighting heroin or opioid addiction to start the recovery process at any time of day.

Visit the IAFC COVID site at Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant & Substance Abuse Program: <https://www.iafc.org/blogs/blog/iafc/2020/12/04/iafc-bja-partner-to-provide-support-and-information-to-responders-responding-to-influence-substance-abuse-cases-positively>. The IAFC has partnered with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) to provide support and information to responders responding to influence substance abuse cases positively. These resources and efforts aim to reduce overdose deaths, promote safety, and support access to treatment and recovery services in the criminal justice system.

