



From Reaction to Prevention

How Partnerships
Between Law Enforcement
and Human Services Can
Usher in a New Normal
(A Roundtable Discussion)



Events of 2020 have prompted growing calls to shift funding from policing to social and health services. Embracing a more holistic approach to serving and protecting people and communities is admirable. But does it miss a larger opportunity? In this virtual roundtable, child welfare expert Molly Tierney, law enforcement veteran Jody Weis, and government human capital specialist Jina Braynon discuss the challenges—and explore how they could be solved in entirely new ways.

Why is now the time to get serious about change?

Jody Weis: I've never met a cop or an FBI agent—unless they have unique training—who really believes they're the best resources for handling someone in crisis. Yet they're often the only ones available, forcing them to deal with these complex situations. Now there's a push to explore if some functions that police departments do would be better accomplished by someone else—resources that are more qualified and may get better outcomes in some circumstances.

Jina Braynon: Jody is the expert in law enforcement. I come at this from a whole-of-government perspective, and I see this as one of many opportunities for government agencies and offices to work in concert versus working in silos. There are real synergies when they

come together—each focused on their core mission and responsibilities—to help people. Plus, when we think about the tax and revenue impacts for governments because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that budgets are going to be reduced. Now more than ever, there's an imperative to do the best work and achieve the best possible outcomes with the resources and talent we currently have.

Molly Tierney: I agree with everything Jody and Jina have said. I also know that change in this country often comes from groundswell. Right now, there's a beating drum about the need for change—particularly in the way we are using resources of government in communities where people have low incomes and in communities of color.

The way we've been using these tools has not resulted in the outcomes we seek. What we seek is for people and communities to be safer, and children to be healthier. Yet that's not what we've achieved. Instead, we've achieved an overrepresentation of these community members in terms of arrests, children in foster care, and dependency on public assistance.

In many cases, we've employed the tools of government in an attempt to force people to change their behavior. What we have the chance to start doing instead is to use the resources of government to invite people into opportunity—to invite them to choose as to their best interest. In my repeated experience, every human acts in their own best interest, and in the presence of opportunity, they respond appropriately.



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How could we be using the resources of government in new ways?

Braynon: We've invested time thinking about how this could happen. One example we see is the opportunity to rethink the decision tree when someone calls 911 for help. Right now, calls are routed for police or fire or medical support. But what if we expanded the branches on the tree to include behavioral health experts or social workers? That way someone with the right skills and expertise can be dispatched. The person in crisis

sees the face of someone who is there to help, and the situation does not escalate inadvertently.

Weis: Another great example is a group called Cure Violence. It's led by an epidemiologist who applies that discipline to the challenge of violence, seeking to cure violence much as you'd try to cure a disease. The organization has developed a series of "violence interrupters." They work in the street, and when they hear a conflict is arising between individuals or gangs, they'll try to get to it without law enforcement, interact with the people, and help de-escalate the situation. It's worked well in Los Angeles, where they had formal ties to the police department but still operated separately. I think that's a great model because it gave Cure Violence a certain level of anonymity to work without the police. But there was also an agreement that if they thought they were going to lose control, they would engage law enforcement.

Tierney: In thinking about this, I go back to the metaphor of the miner's canary. Back in the day, miners went down into the coal mines, and they took a yellow canary to use as a "warning system." If there was gas in the mine, the canary died, and the miners all jumped up and ran. They didn't turn around and ask each other, "What's wrong with that stupid canary?!" I believe that people are in the equivalent of an oxygen-deprived environment having a reasonable response to their environment.

It's probably safe to assume that those of us in this discussion and readers of this article are living in a home where they can lock the doors and go to sleep at night without peril. There's food in the fridge if you're hungry, the lights are on, and the water is clean and safe to drink. The presence of those things frees up all kinds of resources for us.

In communities where it's pervasively the case that those things are not common—that they're not the pattern of what's happening for people—humans start behaving differently. And if any of us were in that situation, we would all be behaving differently



data, but departments have been ill equipped to put all that information into officers' hands. Today we can not only make that data more accessible to officers, but also increase data access across the whole of government. Just imagine what would be possible if you could combine and benefit from data sets across an entire city or bring in data from the dark and open webs.

Braynon: Absolutely. A law enforcement officer responding to a call could know ahead of time that a child with autism is inside. Or a social worker visiting a home could be aware there are numerous weapons registered there. Knowledge is power and having more information before you engage in a situation is better for everybody.

Tierney: From my point of view, there are two big ways we can use data and analytics to support prevention. The first is person-by-person. For example, we could begin to identify early signals that a child or family is heading for crisis. Those predictors could be things like an eight-year-old stealing a car, a four-year-old who's chronically absent from school, or parents showing up in the ER a second time for psychiatric intervention for a pre-teen. These are ticklers that we could use to reach out and help us be proactive before a crisis emerges or escalates.

Unfortunately, that person-by-person approach is tough to scale at speed. The second way offers that scale and speed. It's about using massive data sets to understand what's happening in communities. With those insights, we can stop the myth that there's some "mystery" happening in certain families or households. We can begin to affirm that something's going on at the pattern level. Here in Baltimore, for example, there's one zip code that generates 40 percent of 911 calls. Wouldn't that suggest that there's not something happening independently in those individual homes? That suggests larger community challenges that we need to understand better so that we can tweak how we're appearing, when we're appearing, what we're bringing with us, and how we can be helpful. 📍

right now. All of which is to say: I think we need to start thinking of ways to address these underlying challenges. We need to start orienting around preventing, not just responding.

How might that translate in the real world? In other words, who would take the lead in prevention?

Weis: That is one of the pressing questions. Different jurisdictions have tried different approaches, and what we can conclude so far is that there's no single answer or a silver bullet for this.

Tierney: That's right. Also, I think one of the biggest obstacles is that as we try to find a "home" for prevention—too often we're picking from the existing menu. In my opinion, the reason it's hard to choose is because we just don't have a culture where anybody owns prevention. The government has a culture for responding—the police respond when someone calls, child welfare responds when a child has been harmed, and so on. But we don't have a government entity that gets us all in front of stuff upstream.

It won't be enough to reorganize using existing silos. We need to commit to fundamentally structure government so that our priority is making sure we are helping children, families, and communities to stay strong and stable and to avoid the downriver interventions. After all,

those interventions do damage, they're expensive, they drain resources and, ultimately, they're not actually solving problems.

Braynon: True. Our jails and emergency rooms are focused on reacting and responding. They don't get to the root of how you systemically change a society or achieve long-lasting impacts. While I have no delusion that having caseworkers go on police calls will bring about that kind of change, what it does do is to help people think differently about problems and solutions. Today, police officers frequently go on calls with emergency medical technicians, right? Over time they tend to build knowledge related to medical emergencies. If we get serious about dispatching officers and caseworkers together, they will watch and learn from each other. And as they begin to engage with each other and shift their mindsets, they can begin to identify problems at the systemic level. Alongside that organic change, there's a big role for data and analytics, too.

How can data and analytics help government become more preventive and less reactive?

Weis: The technology has changed quickly, and there are some incredible innovations that government can tap into. For decades, law enforcement has collected massive quantities of