



The time is now for a unified vision of a systems-approach to community safety and well-being

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The policing sector is under intense scrutiny. Long-standing systemic issues have been brought to the centre of public discourse as a result of various judgments in Canada on cases where police have responded inappropriately to incidents, in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the social unrest that followed. From the renewed Black Lives Matter movement to the COVID-19 pandemic, public and political opinion has oscillated between defunding the police and increasing the emphasis on security. While perspectives around the role and involvement of the police differ, what is common across all is what they are trying to ultimately achieve—ensuring that the right people are delivering the right services at the right time based on personalized citizen need. The system is evolving, but not necessarily with a clear, unified vision of a future model. And such a vision is essential.

My career over the last 14 years has focused on safe, secure, and future-forward transformation across the security and justice sector. I have also spent time within a provincial health agency and had the honour of serving as a senior civilian member within a municipal police service in Canada. While there has been much evolution across the sector, a constant has been the need for new, innovative, and integrated approaches to advance the health, safety, and well-being of communities. On a practical level, this means being part of a community where there is less violence, crime, poverty, unemployment, illness, mental suffering, addiction, homelessness, and other social conflicts. On a strategic level, it means those responsible for ensuring the safety, health, and welfare of a community jointly owning the problems, solutions, and innovations. Effective collaboration is also part of community safety and well-being, and it is the keystone to reimagining, planning, and delivering what a future, systems-based approach to community safety and well-being might look like.

The next era of community safety and well-being does not remove police from the equation. Instead, it focuses on collaboration between police services, community organizations, social services, public health, and other agencies to address the social determinants of well-being, often accompanied by the social attributes of crime. By working together,

we can reduce vulnerability to criminality and help close the gaps so that people don't fall into criminality in the first place. So, what does collaboration look like? The obvious example is co-responder models, where police partner with another service provider, such as a social worker or domestic abuse advocate, to effectively respond to calls for service. However, collaboration extends beyond *response*, and can also help with *prevention* and *control*. For instance, in diversion programs, police officers have the discretion to offer an individual treatment and services in lieu of arrest in cases where a person's criminal activity is linked to an underlying issue, such as mental health or substance use. Other examples of effective collaboration include co-location of agencies to enable data-sharing, or embedding clinicians or social service providers within call centres to determine appropriate triage and response. Additionally, collaboration can take the form of co-owned projects, where organizations can pool resources and expertise and have shared accountability for outcomes.

Across the world, research—such as that captured in this special edition issue of the *Journal of Community Safety & Well-Being*, “Envisaging Healthy and Safe Communities: Worldwide Lessons in Police and Public Health Partnerships”—documents the impact and benefits of alternative approaches to community safety and well-being that focus on collaboration between sectors and agencies. In our recent article, *In Pursuit of Next-Era Community Safety and Well-Being*, we documented many examples of progressive police initiatives that are contributing to safety and well-being by reshaping policing models at the community level. Five common threads are woven across all examples that provide a collective Call-to-Action to help get us to the next era of community safety and well-being. The first is taking a systems-based approach to root causes. People served by the police experience complex, multi-layered, and often systemic issues that cannot be tackled by the police alone. The second is a focus on the “service” in police service. Next-era community safety and well-being will require challenging traditional thinking and the existing service delivery model to make the expectations of services provided by the police more sustainable. Third, make “being connected” the *raison d'être*. The

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next era of community safety and well-being must be one in which the relevant parties are intrinsically connected and where data-sharing and systemized reporting across services is the norm, not the exception. Fourth, get uncomfortable. Moving to more integrated systems that tackle root issues might require unconventional approaches that are historically difficult to navigate. Lastly, democratize, share, and use data to drive better outcomes. Police have a wealth of data from calls for their services that can be used to examine and understand the nature and frequency of interactions with the communities they serve and, in turn, help shape new approaches.

As this special edition of the *Journal of Community Safety & Well-Being* captures, these models of collaboration illustrate a clear delineation of positive first responder and preventive outcomes focused on citizen need. In doing so, the “Envisaging Healthy and Safe Communities: Worldwide Lessons in Police and Public Health Partnerships” project highlights that these issues, while occurring across unique jurisdictions and local circumstances, are neither unique nor local. Their commonality amplifies the need for continued innovation and collaboration to determine how the successes of the strategies shared can be scaled and replicated, and to continue to push this collaboration upstream, from response to intervention to prevention. The time to understand and scale the factors that make these initiatives successful is now.

The *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* and the Global Law Enforcement and Public Health Association (GLEPHA) provide forums to not only curate and amplify research around this important topic, but also to drive meaningful change at a policy and program level. Ongoing evaluation and reporting on outcomes are critical to the success of driving change. Evaluation should be embedded at the outset of any pilot project or program and should include a systematic

and clear approach to data gathering, analysis, and reporting. In the absence of evaluation and outcomes-based reporting, it is far more difficult for government and lawmakers, as well as the agencies that deliver the services, to understand the efficacy of alternative approaches and what is required for successful implementation. And while there is global recognition that there is value in alternative approaches, the overarching systems that dictate how approaches are funded and delivered are often disconnected. Local problems need local solutions, but scalability of the attributes that make these local solutions effective requires changes at the system level. This may include novel cross-ministry or interdepartmental planning and funding that shifts community safety and well-being from being an unguaranteed annual budget item vulnerable to other priorities to being part of a systemized approach to budget planning. Integrated delivery should start with integrated planning and funding.

We must all challenge each other to think differently about the next era of community safety and well-being. Ultimately, it is one where policing, community organizations, social services, public health, and other agencies are connected—much like the complex and deep-rooted issues that bring about the need for their services in the first place.

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