

OPINION

Cincinnati's ARC program needs to be under police command



Your Turn
Todd Zinser
Guest columnist

You have to wonder about the future of law enforcement in Cincinnati. Take police vacancies for example. Why are there almost 200 chronically vacant police officer positions for the Cincinnati Police Department? Is it part of a national problem? Does the city have a bad reputation as a place to pursue or advance a law enforcement career? Are the policies of the current administration and City Council making recruiting efforts better or worse? Is it a possible sign that Cincinnati's approach to public safety is undergoing more significant change than we understand?

Since 2002, the "Collaborative Settlement Agreement" has served as the foundation of the city's public safety strategy. It was praised as a model for cities and police departments across the country. For 18 years, Cincinnati Police regularly updated the public about the progress of the Collaborative on a timeline published on the department's website. However, the CPD's most recent timeline entry is dated February 2020, five years ago. The Collaborative seems to have faded away.

Within months of taking office in 2022, Cincinnati Mayor Aftab Pureval established a six-month "Alternative Response to Crisis" pilot program. After just four months, in his first State of the City address, the mayor declared that it was already a success. ARC was described as providing unarmed mental health professionals for over 200 non-violent 911 calls and freed up 250 hours of police time. In his May 25, 2023, budget letter, the mayor said the program "demonstrated tremendous impact." He made it a permanent program and doubled its staff.

According to the city's data, since its inception in 2022 to February 2025, ARC has handled a total of 2,382 calls. That figure represents a minuscule fraction (0.006) of the 396,632 calls handled by CPD during the same period. That does not seem like a tremendous impact.

The mayor's address implied that the ARC staff would focus on mental health crises. That is not the case. From July 22 to the present, "Mental Disorder/Behavioral Problems" accounted for 7% of the calls responded to by the program staff. In contrast, 38% of the calls (904) were categorized as "Trespassing/Unwanted." The city's data shows that ARC's "Community Responders" are being dispatched to a wide range of 911 calls for police and fire, including reported criminal incidents.



Elm Street at 14th Street is closed after a man was fatally shot by Cincinnati Police outside of Music Hall in Over-the-Rhine on June 27, 2024. CARA OWSLEY/THE ENQUIRER

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The mayor was quick to establish the ARC pilot program, quick to call it a success, quick to make it permanent, and quick to double its resources. For something as important as public safety, it is all happening too quickly and without proper, non-political evaluation. It is also the subject of Unfair Labor Practice complaints against the city by both the Cincinnati Fraternal Order of Police and the firefighters' local union. The unions believe the ARC should have been negotiated. Take that as a sign of problems with the program.

You then have to wonder where Police Chief Teresa Theetge stands on all this. The longer the chief fails to fill police officer vacancies, the harder it will be to avoid the mayor shifting those positions to the ARC program. In the interest of public safety, the chief should immediately require that the Community Responders be placed under police command. The 911 system and dispatchers should go back to their original training. The police can then decide whether support from Community Responders is appropriate on any particular call. That would be a much better option than the mayor taking funding from the police to cultivate and grow the ARC program, which is likely just ahead.

Todd J. Zinser is a Cincinnati native and resides in West Price Hill. He retired as the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Commerce after 31 years of conducting audits and investigations of federal officials, programs, and operations. He remains a certified fraud examiner and has recently joined the Board of the Charter Committee of Cincinnati.