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EDITORIAL

Cops and the mental health crisis: Reset needed

Lawsuit against Worcester police demands better 911 response.

By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated March 22, 2026, 4:00 a.m.



The exterior of the Worcester Police Headquarters. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

A mother calls 911 because her 14-year-old autistic son is displaying aggressive behavior at home. By the time police arrive, the boy has locked himself in his room and refuses to communicate.

What follows is every mother's nightmare. One officer kicks in the bedroom door, all three then pin the boy on the floor, handcuffing him behind his back. The boy's screaming and crying goes on for 20 minutes.

"He's triggered by our presence," one officer says and leaves the room, but another remains and the crying continues.

Eventually his mother is able to convince him to leave his bedroom and go to the hospital.

He is strapped and restrained on a stretcher during his ambulance ride.

Welcome to modern policing in Worcester in the 21st century.

This is why three disability rights organizations filed a [federal lawsuit](#) this week against the Worcester Police Department, charging that its 911 program discriminates against those with mental health disabilities — and thus violates the Americans with Disabilities Act — despite an acknowledgment by the department that some 25 percent of those calls "are from people who are experiencing a mental health crisis." That would mean some 35,000 calls a year in the state's [second-largest city](#).

The suit — filed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Massachusetts (NAMI), NAMI of Central Massachusetts, and the Parent-Professional Advocacy League — is the first of its kind in Massachusetts, although the issue has been raised in other jurisdictions, including [Washington, D.C.](#)

"People with mental health disabilities are entitled to a safe, appropriate and non-discriminatory emergency response in the same way and to the same extent that the general public receives," the suit charges. "When armed law enforcement officers are the

sole or primary responders to mental health emergencies, there is an increased risk of escalation, trauma and injuries, as well as increased likelihood of arrest, incarceration and death, with even higher risks for people of color.”

It doesn't have to be that way, of course. Some departments, [Boston included](#), have teams of mental health professionals on board or on call to accompany police in responding to 911 calls involving a mental health emergency. In 2023, Boston Medical Center clinicians joined BPD officers on [2,752 responses](#) to 911 calls and 1,871 follow-ups.

Sadly, some police departments come to the realization too late that sending in armed police officers to deal with someone suffering a mental health crisis can result in injury or death.

A little more than a year ago, the [Cambridge Police Department](#) launched its co-response team. But that was only after the tragic police-involved shooting in 2023 that resulted in the death of Sayed Faisal, a 20-year-old University of Massachusetts student who was in the throes of a [mental health crisis](#). Faisal was seen cutting himself, triggering the initial 911 call, and was outside “partially unclothed on a frigid day in January,” according to [a report](#) prepared for Cambridge PD by the Police Executive Research Forum.

That report also offered up a long list of training recommendations for police, including implementing body-worn cameras and the formation of a co-response team.

A trailblazing [2023 study](#) by the research forum on new models for police response to mental health 911 calls noted, “The dramatic rise in need for mental health services in recent years has not been met by a corresponding increase in treatment services. As a result, police have often had to fill the void as first responders — a role they did not seek.

“There is a compelling need for law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve to develop better approaches to serving people in crisis compassionately and

effectively while keeping everybody safe from harm.”

Worcester police have [not commented on the lawsuit](#).

But it’s not as if Worcester was totally unaware of the problem or the range of possible solutions. For some 18 months beginning in 2023, the city actually had a [pilot program](#) to deal with those in crisis but, according to the lawsuit, during its limited lifespan it “failed to provide meaningful alternative responses to people with mental health disabilities and produced little, if any, diversion of 911 mental health emergency calls.”

In fact, Worcester’s Police Department has a sorry history that resulted in a two-year [Department of Justice probe](#) which found the department used “excessive force,” including “during encounters with people who have behavioral health disabilities or are in crisis.”

That report was issued in December 2024 and yet, according to the lawsuit, the WPD’s [Emergency Mental Health Procedures still describes](#) people with mental illnesses in a way that “is a recipe for inflicting unnecessary force, injury, and trauma on people with mental health disabilities.”

The result? A 14-year-old pinned to the floor of his bedroom by officers or a 10-year-old autistic boy pulled from his mother’s car and restrained face-down on the ground, an officer’s knee on his neck, until an ambulance arrives. Both cases are detailed in the lawsuit.

It shouldn’t take a lawsuit to bring a police department into this century — certainly not after that devastating DOJ report.

And it shouldn’t take a tragedy.

The usefulness of co-response teams to deal with mental health crises is [well established](#). From South Burlington, Vt., to Seattle, the models are many and varied.

[Legislation](#) filed by Democratic Representatives Lindsey Sabadosa of Northampton and Natalie Higgins of Leominster could jump-start that process across the Commonwealth. Since 2023 the two lawmakers have proposed a state grant program for communities looking to set up unarmed responses to emergency calls. It still hasn't made it out of committee.

As the research forum report notes, police across the country didn't ask for the many failures of this nation's mental health system to be placed at their doorstep. It just has. And a compassionate response will require a communitywide response. If achieving that goal has to include a lawsuit, well, so be it.

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