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Shifting From Handcuffs to Health: A Brief on Smart, Fiscally-responsible, and Compassionate First Response

The Problem: Jails as De Facto Mental Health Institutions

For decades, our communities have defaulted to law enforcement to respond to mental health crises, substance use disorders, and homelessness. Treating these public health issues as criminal offenses has created an expensive and punitive system that traps vulnerable individuals in a revolving door of incarceration without ever addressing the root causes.

- **The Incarceration Crisis:** Roughly **60%** of individuals in U.S. jails and prisons navigate a substance use disorder, and **44%** have a documented history of mental illness (*Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics*).
- **The Systemic Mismatch:** In **44 states**, the largest psychiatric facility is not a hospital, but a prison or jail (*Source: NAMI*).
- **The Conditional Trap:** When access to treatment *is* provided, it is frequently delivered provisionally through the criminal justice system—tied to probation and the constant **threat of rearrest** hanging over an individual's head. This creates a high-stress environment that does not support long-term recovery.
- **The Safety Gap:** Research indicates that over **75% of 911 calls** that result in police being dispatched are for nonviolent issues. The results of an armed response are often tragic; individuals with untreated mental illness are **16 times more likely to be killed** during a police encounter than other civilians (*Source: Treatment Advocacy Center*).

The Solution: A Right-Response System for Crisis

We do not call a plumber to fix an electrical short. Why do we dispatch an armed officer to handle a mental health crisis? True public safety relies on specialization—freeing up police resources to focus on violent crime while letting health professionals handle public health. The solution is a comprehensive **Alternative First Responder Model** built into the civic infrastructure.

Instead of a standard police dispatch, non-violent health and poverty-related emergencies are routed to a multidisciplinary team available around the clock:

- **Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs)** to manage immediate physical health needs.
- **Mental Health & Substance Use Professionals** to provide immediate clinical de-escalation and assess care needs.
- **Peer Support Specialists & Community Health Workers** who leverage shared lived experience to build trust and navigate systems.
- **Clinicians at 911 Dispatch** to ensure incoming crises are accurately triaged from the very first second.

Why it Works and What it Costs

In addition to being more compassionate and getting better results, shifting to an alternative responder model is a matter of pragmatism, government efficiency, and fiscal accountability.

	Traditional Response	Alternative Response	Impact & Source
Cost Per Incident	\$646	\$151	Save \$495 per call (Source: Vera Institute of Justice)
Public Safety Focus	Diluted by police having to act as social workers	Allows police to focus on serious crimes	Maximizes specialized resources
Community Stability	Exacerbates symptoms via jail	Solves root causes via care	Low-level crime drops up to 34%

This isn't just common sense—it's what the public wants. Approximately **76% of voters** support a first-response model led by mental health professionals instead of police for suicide or mental health crises (Source: *Data for Progress*)

About the Filmmaker & Project

Leigh Scott (Writer/Director, *Uncarcerated*) works full-time on the ground with the homeless and justice-impacted community, bringing authentic, front-line expertise to the screen. Beyond the documentary film, the *Uncarcerated* impact campaign actively drives systemic change through a multi-platform approach:

- **The Podcast:** *Uncarcerated* platforms formerly incarcerated individuals, giving them the mic to tell their own stories with dignity, nuance, and unfiltered truth.
- **The Digital Hub:** *Uncarcerated.org* was built to foster an active community of justice-impacted artists, writers, and advocates, while simultaneously operating as a vital resource hub for individuals returning home and their families.



To learn more, access resources, or join our community network, visit our platform or connect with us after the screening representjustice.org/uncarcerated