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COMMUNITY POLICING IN ACTION

EVALUATING THE WATERLOO REGION POLICE SERVICE'S COMMUNITY RESOURCE OFFICE PROGRAM

Arden Fenton, BSc; Kelly Anthony, PhD[2]
[1]Health Studies, University of Waterloo, agfenton@uwaterloo.ca; [2]Social Psychology, University of Houston

ABSTRACT

The Waterloo Regional Police Service's Community Resource Officer (CRO) program is a 911 call diversion program that redirects high-need individuals from traditional policing towards a specialized police unit. This unit was designed to decrease incidents reported by services and community members by connecting program users to existing community services. Through conducting an impartial evaluation, this study hopes to determine the CRO program's effectiveness and improve the CRO program and its utilization of associated programs. This study will perform and analyze interviews of stakeholder opinions and feedback and create a program logic model for future program development and evaluation.

Interviews were conducted with 12 CROs and five social service employees. To determine the effectiveness of the program, a second phase of the study will be required which will include program user opinions and quality indicator development. Based on phase one interviews, a logic model was created, and strengths and weaknesses were analyzed. Program strengths include connections to services, access to the target population and adaptability. Some program weaknesses include low community awareness, low resources for community needs, and vague roles/responsibilities. These weaknesses can be resolved through external publishing, increasing resources, formalizing the program, and additional training.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional policing models have once again been brought into question as the militarization of the police and allegations of excessive force became contentious topics once again in the last year.[1] This recent bout of questioning, in part driven by the Black Lives Matter movement, has caused many in the region and around the world to demand the defunding of police and/or the reallocation of police funds towards community initiatives and programs.[2, 3] In response to this sentiment, some would argue that there are already multiple alternative policing programs within the police force that focus on community improvement. Many of these programs run in conjunction with regular policing to protect and assist vulnerable people within the community. With current policing practices coming under fire,[4]

academia is well-positioned to investigate the effectiveness of these alternative policing strategies and their impact on the community. The arm's length evaluation of alternative policing strategies is necessary for evidence-based policing or responsible fund reallocation, both within and outside the police service.

For the past 25 years, the Waterloo Regional Police Service (WRPS) has run the Community Resource Officer (CRO) program. The CROs serve the most vulnerable people, at an individual level, within the Kitchener-Waterloo region by providing connections to community resources and acting as a consistent point of contact for those facing persistent challenges. Those who interact with CROs typically experience chronic homelessness, poor mental health, domestic violence, and substance use, among other problems. For this reason, CROs are trained to deal with these high-stress scenarios and connect those in crisis with community programs that support their needs. The CROs accomplish this through collaborating with community/non-profit program providers. Knowledge surrounding the CRO program has been primarily transferred from officer to officer through job shadowing and apprenticeship in addition to the aforementioned training. Because of this approach to onboarding and knowledge translation, little has been recorded or shared with the community in any formal way regarding the CRO program's purpose, logic, and impact.

While this program has been considered highly valuable by the WRPS, it has yet to be formally evaluated. Through this study, the research team hopes to provide the WRPS with an impartial evaluation of the CRO program to outline its framework properly, assess its effectiveness, take note of its strengths, address areas for improvement, and disseminate these findings. The CRO program is not the only of its kind within Canada. Various similar programs have naturally emerged in different police departments; however given the limited number of articles found during the literature search for this project, it appears that very few third-party evaluations have been published on these programs. As a result, there is little to no basis for whether these programs are worth funding or replicating. It is essential (and timely) that we evaluate the CRO program as such a longstanding program would serve as a basis for designing or improving other similar programs. This study is one of the first to evaluate the effectiveness of this program format and will be extremely useful as a basis for how to evaluate similar programs.

COMMUNITY-BASED POLICING

Community-based policing, described as a community relationship-focused policing strategy, has been in greater demand in the last few years as tensions between the police service and citizens rise. Community policing strategies emphasize the quality of life for civilians by developing partnership dynamics and a problem-solving approach.[5] According to Skogan and Hartnett, components of community-based policing include the diffusion of authority within police service, the focus on problem-oriented strategies, facilitating and encouraging the community to take part in police policy decision-making, and empowering citizens to participate in crime prevention.[6] Common goals of community-based policing include the reduction of citizen fear of crime and community disorder and enhancing the citizen trust and attitudes associated with the police service.[7,8] In summary, community-based policing is a human-centric relationship. This is apparent when contrasted to traditional policing approaches that act with little collaboration and focus on resource inputs and short-term outcomes.[9] While 85% of police jurisdictions in the United States have claimed to or will be adopting community-based policing,[10] very few that had claimed to practice community-based policing had all key components of community policing.[8, 11]

The concept of community-based policing is not new; it started being implemented in the United States in the 1960s in response to widespread discontent and a lack of community connection with the police.[5] While it is hard to measure the impact of community-based policing as a philosophy, there are different initiatives that are directly evaluated for effectiveness. Evidence

surrounding community policing initiatives has had mixed results regarding changes in officer satisfaction and reducing citizen fear of crime; however, there has been a strong association between community-based policing initiatives and general crime reduction.[12]

POLICE CALL DIVERSION PROGRAM

To date, the core of the CRO program is based on 911 call diversion. Using 911 call data or referral, individuals are identified and then analyzed for community service need. Little research has been published on 911 call diversion programs due to the fear of underwhelming results.[13, 14] There are two key publications on police call diversion programs that help to inform important features of this evaluation.

The Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets program, also known as CAHOOTS, was established in Eugene, Oregon, USA in 1989.[15] Launched to provide crisis intervention in nonviolent situations, CAHOOTS diverts 911 calls away from police and towards a specially trained team including a crisis worker and medic (being a nurse, paramedic or EMT).[14] These teams provide a broad range of services, including crisis counselling; suicide prevention, assessment and intervention; conflict resolution and mediation; grief and loss counselling and associated services; substance abuse mitigation and reduction; housing crisis provision; first aid and non-emergency medical care; resource connection and referrals; and transportation to services.[16] Generally speaking, this program has been seen as the template to start 911 call diversion initiatives as it has been proven to be financially and socially responsible. As of 2017, approximately 17% of the Eugene Police Department's overall call volume was redirected to CAHOOTS; this led to an estimated savings of $8.5 million in public safety spending per year.[17]

The Support Team Assisted Response pilot program, also known as STAR (Support Team Assisted Response), ran in Denver, Colorado between June 1st, 2020, and November 30th, 2020.[18] Inspired by CAHOOTS, STAR dispatched teams of health professionals and social workers to aid in incidents of intoxicated persons, police requested assistances, indecent exposure, welfare checks, suicidal series, trespassing or unwanted persons, syringe disposal (HRAC), and transportation to services.[18] Out of the 2576 calls eligible, 748 incidents were handled by STAR teams.[18] Overall, these had an average on-scene personnel time to resolution of 24.65 min for STAR teams, whereas regular police had an average of 34.08 min for regular police response.[18]

THE HUB MODEL AND SITUATION TABLES

The umbrella of community-based policing initiatives is wide and diverse. Because of this, the goals and formats of these initiatives vary greatly.[12] For the WRPS, the CRO Program is integrated into the 'Hub' model of intervention. The Hub model is an upstream risk-mitigating approach to connecting complex risk clients to services.[12] Composed of health and community service providers, specialists in various disciplines meet to assess and identify the needs of complex, high-risk clients to provide intervention before a harmful event occurs.[12] This cluster of collaborating health and community service providers, known as a situation table, has been named Connectivity in the Waterloo region. The Hub model has three major components - risk detection, discussion of solutions, and the provision of intervention. With the CRO program being incorporated into Connectivity, this is the primary pathway that the WRPS uses which connects users of the program to the services they need. The CRO program has referred 73% of cases assessed by Connectivity to bring its users to the services they need.[19] The CRO program primarily works in the risk detection and discussion phases of the situation table. This benefits both the users, of which 76% get the services required for their situation to be addressed,[19] and the WRPS. In the Waterloo region, 80% of police calls were classified as non-criminal and therefore are more likely to be preventable with intervention.[19] With the implementation of Connectivity, there was a 46% reduction in repeat calls over 90 days; this reduction alone freed up an estimated $100,000 of relocatable funds.[19] Early outcomes surrounding the

implementation of situation tables have shown the following benefits for the community: increased and faster introduction to services;[20,21] stronger knowledge of client needs;[22] better communication and client flow between services;[19,22] improved client-provider relations;[24] and reduced barriers within and gaps between services.[19]

RESEARCH PURPOSE, AIM, AND OBJECTIVES

When conducting a program evaluation, implementing a hypothesis would be introducing bias through the introduction of expectations. Conducting an impartial evaluation is an exploratory and evolving practice that requires flexibility that a hypothesis does not allow. For these two reasons, this study was driven by the evaluation's research question rather than the traditional hypothesis. Through conducting an impartial evaluation, this study hopes to understand if the CRO program is effective. Additionally, this study hopes to improve the CRO program and its utilization of associated programs. This study's objectives include performing and analyzing interviews of stakeholder opinions and feedback and creating a program logic model for future program development and evaluation.

Very few systematic studies have been conducted on community-based policing, despite the extreme popularity and widespread nature of the approach. This scarcity of knowledge has extended into community-based policing initiatives due to the fear of underwhelming results.[14] This thesis will aim to address this gap by conducting an evaluation of a unique and long-standing community-based policing program. Through this study, a description of this program has been provided and was analyzed to identify strengths and weaknesses. Prominent and promising features of success can then be implemented in new and innovative programs, while the hazardous qualities can be avoided. While both STAR and CAHOOTS have displayed promising results, neither quite fit the model of the CRO program as police calls are rerouted to a specialized unit rather than an alternative service or discipline. These programs have remarkably similar goals and targeted services, which can inform the CRO evaluation on what is typically impacted by 911 call diversion programs. Due to the popularity of the Hub model, some evaluations help us to better understand the nature of Connectivity's relationship with the CRO program. With this stronger understanding of the Hub model, there is the possibility that interactions with or features of Connectivity's relationship with the CRO program will be discovered through this evaluation. If found, relationships and interactions between the CRO program and Connectivity can lead to better and more efficient partnerships between the police service and different forms of the Hub model.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

CROs and adult members of the community were recruited for interviews regarding their interaction with the CROs as a citizen or a community program provider from within the Waterloo Region. Interviews were conducted with 12 CROs and five social service employees. No additional inclusion criteria other than some level of involvement with the CRO program was specified for the interviews as a holistic community perspective is desired. No exclusion criteria were specified.

De-identified police call data were analyzed in an exploratory fashion to identify key quality indicators as a basis for evaluation in addition to maintenance-based monitoring of the program post initial evaluation. To be included in this data set, participants must have had a formal interaction with a CRO in which a report was filed. No exclusion criteria were specified for the archival data to ensure bias was not introduced by excluding a subgroup of program users. As of publication, this analysis was still being conducted for phase 2 of the evaluation.

POLICE INTERACTIONS DATA

Provided by two volunteer CROs, three months of prospective interactions were self-reported with the objective to create quality indicators for the evaluation. To ensure confidentiality, data received by the research team were de-identified. Seventy-

nine interactions were reported with 25 elements each, including information about perceived demographics; general location, reason, and referral source of interaction; severity and complexity of the case; relation/use of other services; and program user attitudes toward police. It was not linked to any other database or alternative information that could lead to re-identification. The data provided was stored on a secure password-protected University of Waterloo server for at least one year after use. No additional consent from individuals in the database was required.

Prior to publication, quality indicators have yet to be formulated. Based on the logic model determined by the interview analysis, both direct and indirect quality indicators will be created to measure the desired outcomes and goals of the CRO program within phase two of the study. With the wealth of data provided by the CROs, we will see current trends among variables that may be metrics for success. To be in line with the CRO program's goals, metrics that indicate reduced 911 call volumes or increased provision of services will be considered successful. Without quantitative indicators for program evaluation, there is an extreme risk of bias due to the overreliance on qualitative measures such as testimonials. Therefore, the evaluation would lack the evidence it needs to ensure that the program is working if it moved on with interviews alone. A combination of exploratory discussion with the CROs and the logic-driven analysis of the police record data will be used to find valid quality indicators that can be monitored to view the program's effectiveness over time. Not all portions of the framework will have a quality indicator due to time constraints; however, the indicators proven to be valid and maintainable will be kept. Additionally, this data will be applied to describe the users of the CRO program, their needs, and the services used. This will be used as a statistical basis to drive training, resource allocation and evolution of the program to best fit users' needs. For this phase, the data collected was used to describe the current state of the CRO program and provide some context to the information provided within the CRO interviews.

INTERVIEWS

Recruitment of participants was sourced through the WRPS network of contacts and by the Community Roundtable and local social service agencies. These individuals were identified as CROs, important community stakeholders, users/beneficiaries of the program or Connectivity table members who have interacted with or have been affected by the CRO program. The WRPS made initial contact on behalf of the research team using a recruitment script. One of two recruitment scripts were sent via email. These scripts vary in content as they were customized to suit our two categories of participants: users of the program and community program providers that interact with the CROs. Participants then contacted the research team directly, indicating their desire to participate in an interview.

Approximately one-hour, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted to gather and analyze stakeholders' opinions and feedback on the CRO program. Due to COVID-19 restrictions limiting physical meetings, the research team interviewed participants via Zoom™, Microsoft Teams™ or by phone. The research team provided interviewees with a consent form to inform them about the purpose of the study, procedures, information on their right to decline or withdraw from the study, and potential risks involved during the interview process. At the beginning of the interview, verbal consent and consent to record was obtained by reading the interview script. If consent was not obtained, the interview was stopped. These interviews followed the prompts as laid out in the interview script and proceeded based on participant comments. Guided by the interviewee's responses, questions were asked regarding clarification or to get a more nuanced view of their perspective. Once the interview concluded, the interviewer then debriefed the participant by thanking them, going over the debrief form and offering them a virtual copy. Post-interview, the audio recording was censored of identifying information (such as names, addresses etc.) and labelled via participant ID number before being stored on a secure password-protected University of Waterloo server for at least one year after use.

As specified in the consent form, in addition to the verbal script, refusal to answer a question or requesting to be withdrawn from the study was permitted at any point in time during the span of the interview. Under the circumstances that the participant withdrew from the study, they were asked if they wished to have their previously provided comments removed from later analysis. If yes, then the recording was securely disposed of immediately upon the call's conclusion. Shortly after the conclusion of the data collection phase of the study, a formal appreciation email was sent, including a statement of appreciation, details about the purpose of the study, restatement of the provisions for confidentiality and security of data, an indication of when the report will be available, how to obtain a copy of the report, contact information for the researchers, and the ethics review and clearance statement. Another similar message of appreciation was sent upon publishing the report, indicating that it could be viewed.

These audio recordings were analyzed via reflective thematic analysis, which identifies meaningful theme patterns.[25] Because of the evaluation's exploratory nature, the use of thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility and high compatibility with semi-structured interviews.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE# 42547). Given that we are working with the police, coercive power dynamics were an area of concern. This was especially true if recruitment of community members occurred through their current CRO officer. Thus, recruitment was sent out by the research and statistics division in the WRPS. While it was still identifiable as a police contact, this removed some of the power dynamics that occurs when officers are invited to participate through their supervisors. There were also concerns of power dynamics as superior officers may influence the CROs responses. Understanding these, each part of this evaluation emphasised that all participation was voluntary and that no information in an identifiable form was provided to the WRPS. While recruitment had to go through the WRPS, all forms of participation information were inaccessible to them. This helped to ensure anonymity. Given that sensitive topics were brought up during the interviews, participants were informed of the proper withdrawal procedure to inform them of their rights. There were no additional ethical concerns regarding the use of police interaction data given the procedure established above.

RESULTS

POLICE INTERACTION DATA

The interactions between the CROs and program users occurred mostly within the community members' homes (45%), within the broader community (30%), or over the phone (25%). Through interviews, it has been noted that temporary shelter sites within the region such as ABTC/Lot 42 may not call 911 due to a tumultuous relationship with police. Thirty-seven percent of interactions had previous CRO involvement 60% were new to CRO aid, and 3% were unknown. These interactions were all conducted in English. The majority of the programs had unknown race or ethnicity, according to the CRO officers reports. Approximately 10% of CRO program users are a case on the connectivity table.

INTERVIEWS

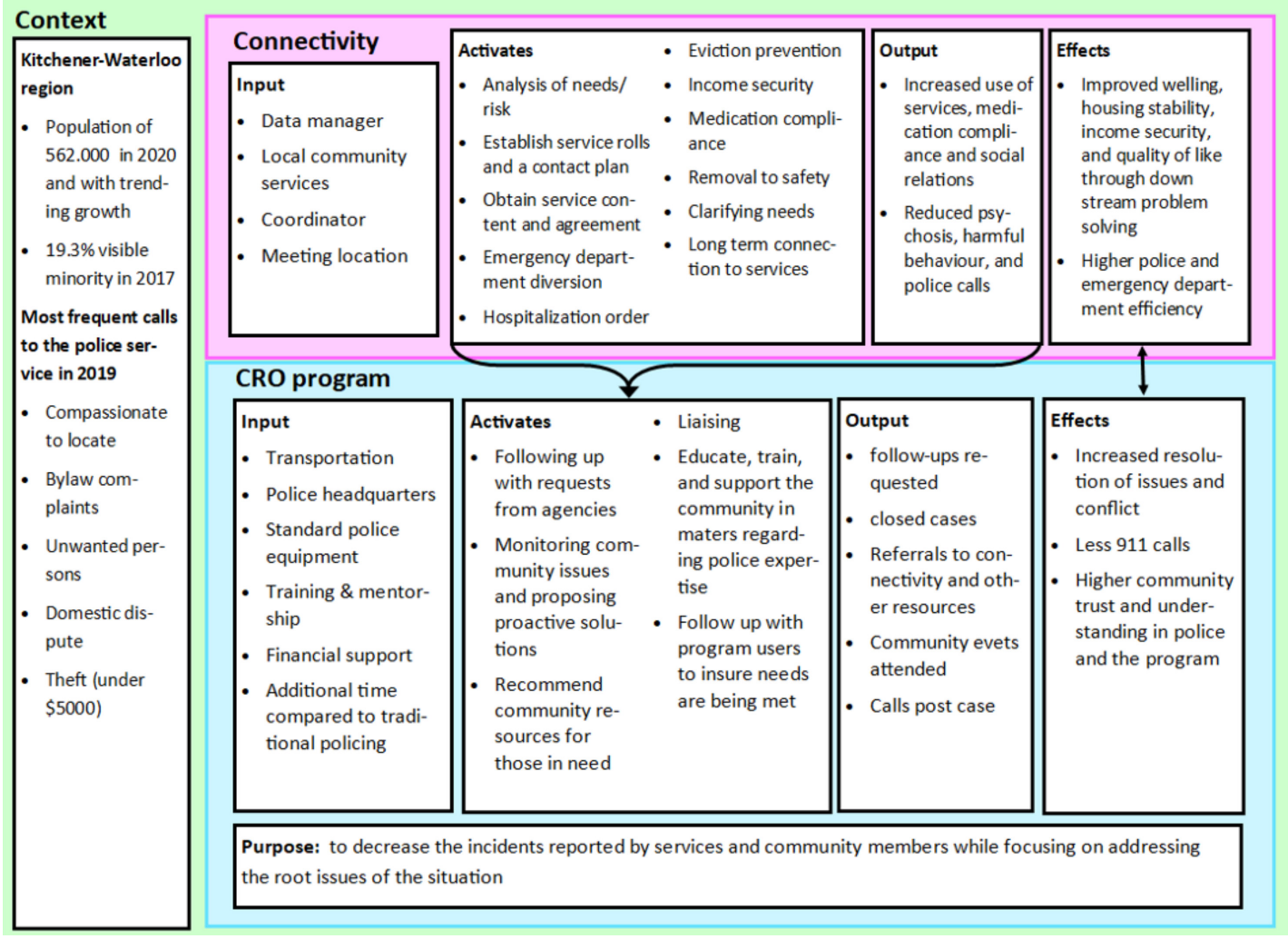
Interviews were conducted with 12 CROs and five social service employees. Through the CRO interview questions relating to the general functioning of the program, the following framework was created. These questions included information regarding the general context surrounding the program and the program's core components such as its purpose, inputs, activities, outputs, and effects. The CRO programs' relationship to Connectivity was also illustrated within the logic model below as they directly contribute to each other's success. Details surrounding the Connectivity's logic model was sourced from Newberry & Brown's Connectivity program evaluation.[19] Future use of this logic model will include integrating quality indicators as developed through police interactions data.

The CRO Program was seen positively by all CROs and considered a necessary component of community policing. The program itself was considered only as strong as its bidirectional connections with community services. As a result, CROs enjoy the more stable hours associated with the role as it helps in communication with these community services. Additionally, a major concern of the CROs includes the lack of adequate and effective resources to address mental health and addiction. Because of this concern, four of 12 CROs have indicated that they would like to have more Impact workers/support. According to nine CROs, a lack of public awareness makes it hard to address community needs. This is particularly difficult with the current negative public perceptions of police; however, this issue could be mitigated with alternative uniforms or plain clothes. While this does afford the CROs more flexibility in their role, they have indicated that they take on tasks that do not necessarily fall in line with the program's intended purpose.

The unclear jurisdictions and role ambiguity makes the CRO program a "dumping ground" according to four CROs. Additional CROs have been recommended as the small size of the program is still not able to support the vast and exacerbated need of the community. This recommendation is supported by five of 12 CROs. Because of the attitude shift around policing, many CROs struggle with the cancellation of other related police programs, such as the School Resource Officer (SRO) program, which was closed as of June 2021.[26] This has been a struggle for CROs as the removal of these supportive services may lead to the gaps in service that the CRO must fill.

Nine of 12 CROs' indicated a desire for some additional training; some recommendations included: introductory training for community resources, mental health education (e.g., de-escalation training, suicide prevention, and diagnostic information), public speaking/political training, communication and active listening, crime

Figure 1: Joint logic model of the CRO program and Connectivity, including their interactions and overlap. `Contextual information was provided by WRPS.



prevention through environmental design (also known as CPTD), relationship building, and diversity training. Generally, there was a positive inclination towards more consistent workshops to both update and access more training opportunities.

Social service support employees agreed to speak about their work with the CROs. Their responses were uniformly and strongly supportive. These included those working in crisis services at hospitals, community health services, legal and housing services for those living with significant mental health, housing, and/or addiction challenges. They reported that the primary difference was the CROs ability to build relationships with vulnerable community members using compassion, superb listening, and de-escalation skills, among others. They all saw the CRO program as critical in meeting the needs of our community's most vulnerable. They all reported that the CROs appear to be uniquely qualified to deal with the often urgent and sometimes risky situations of those suffering from mental illness and addiction. All five described the CRO involvement and work at the Connection Tables to be essential. They each felt that all police would benefit from the kind of training and skills the CROs demonstrate. Communication between agencies, including the CROs, provides social services a critical resource when working with our community's most vulnerable.

DISCUSSION

Within the limitations of phase one of the study, it is difficult to determine if the CRO program successfully achieved its goals. Without the quality indicators and additional interviews from the program users, all that we can discuss are the internal operations of the program and the CRO and social service provider perspective. With phase two of the study, we hope to better analyze the effectiveness of the CRO program with this holistic perspective.

Based on the results of this study, a few recommendations can be made to improve the program. Given the bidirectional relationship between the CRO program and community services, promoting stronger relationships with these services are bound to improve the CRO program. The CROs themselves have indicated the desire for introductory training for community resources and additional relationship-building training, which would improve these relationships during staff transitions. Further outreach to these services through regular collaboration with officers could improve relationships (e.g., police service participating in weekly soup kitchen activities).[27] By integrating the CROs into social services, they are able to respond to the needs of the service faster and more efficiently while also having more knowledge of the service when it comes to connecting program users.[27] To accomplish this level of integration, more staff is needed within the CRO program. Considering the increasing number of program users, increased staffing levels would also improve access to the program and reduce wait times.

Additional CRO training could improve communication and interactions with these services. For example, mental health education (such as de-escalation training, suicide prevention, and diagnostic information) can help not only the CRO when interacting with users experiencing mental health crises, but also with services that commonly interact with diagnosed individuals.[28] Having common terminology and understanding of issues promotes smoother knowledge transfer, a crucial factor when dealing with emergency situations.[28]

Public speaking, political, diversity, communication and active listening training can also improve knowledge transfer skills and reduce conflict when discussing issues or in crisis events.[29] Additionally, more training in areas that are commonly requested by services, such as CPTD, would strengthen the program's utility to social services. While CROs are more trained in these areas than traditional officers, the value in this training is indispensable; it should be considered that this CRO style training and experience could be beneficial for all sworn officers. While not every officer can become a CRO, these officers can at least be exposed to this style of policing through the continuation of the WRPS's onboarding process in which new hires spend two weeks with the

CROs.

Overall, these factors suggest that the program should be moving towards a larger, centralized, and more formal structure. In part, this could be accomplished by introducing a manual that outlines a clear CRO mandate and responsibilities, a program ombudsperson, a community oversight committee, and an arm's length research partnerships/ongoing evaluations and reports. Provision of these on internal and external platforms would also ensure transparency within the police force and the public.[30] External publications of CRO program information and activity can improve public relations surrounding the service.[30] Currently, there is no public-facing information on the program. For this reason, it is recommended that an engaging and accessible website be made by a professional web designer or expansion to the WRPS family of websites to share CRO work and stories with the public. This could reduce both speculation on the program's function and possibly create an avenue for program user outreach.

With the formalization of the program should come formalization of hiring practices. To date, there was remarkably little regarding formal candidate selection. As part of the next phase of the study, it is recommended that the WRPS and research team identify ideal attributes of CROs and assess all new CRO recruits on those dimensions. For example, this may be accomplished by using validated personality inventories such as OCEAN to assess the most desired community policing characteristics.[31] OCEAN is a self-report scale that measures the Big Five personality traits of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism.[31] Through the use of scales such as OCEAN, the interview process becomes more objective, formalized and transparent to the public compared to the CROs previous non-standardized hiring practices.[31] Formalizing candidate selection, alongside the increased size of the program, can also be used as an opportunity to promote diversity within the CROs via targeted hiring.[32]

CONCLUSION

The allocation of funding regarding police programs is controversial. For this reason, solid rationale and evidence of program effectiveness are needed to obtain community and funder trust. As previously said, the creation of the CRO program has been a paperless trail with little to no documentation on the program's framework and activities. A lack of documentation makes it difficult to explain the program's value to stakeholders and funders or improve upon the program using evidence. With Phase one of the CRO program evaluation complete, this study has set the baseline for continued evaluation. The evaluation phase outlined the framework necessary to gain stakeholder and funder trust by outlining the program in a comprehensive and logical fashion. This evidence-based approach furthers and improves community trust as it supplies data showing whether the program supports its users' needs and evolves through the implementation of stakeholder feedback. Through the publication of this program evaluation, the findings, including the CRO program's potential strengths and recommendations for improvement are intended to be shared with the WRPS and other police-based program providers. Some strengths of the program include its connections with other services, access to the target population and adaptability. Some weaknesses of the program include low community awareness, low resources to address needs, and vague roles and responsibilities. These weaknesses can be fixed through increasing program awareness, increasing resources, formalizing the program, and additional training for CROs. By knowing the effectiveness of the CRO program's approach to community policing, researchers can better understand the positive or negative components of community policing as a whole and provide a broader wealth of knowledge towards evidence-based policing. Therefore, these findings and future findings in phase 2 may positively contribute to the CRO program, the Waterloo community, and other similar community-based police programs. Potential benefits include increased program effectiveness, increased community trust in the police, goal-oriented allocation of public funds, and improved health and social outcomes for citizens interacting with the CRO program. Later phases of this study will continue to pursue the effectiveness of

the CRO program through third-party evaluation with a program user perspective.

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Keywords: community policing, police diversion programs, program evaluation, mixed methods, community systems, social services

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