

Community Needs and Co-Responder Programs

Fire departments across the country are increasingly responding to community needs that extend beyond traditional emergency incidents, such as behavioral health crises and repeat 9-1-1 callers. Co-responder programs that pair first responders with clinicians, social workers, or other human services professionals have emerged as an approach to address community needs. The purpose of this Strategic Scan was to provide a snapshot of how local governments are engaging with these programs, the challenges driving their development, and key considerations shaping program design and sustainability. Data were gathered in January and February of 2026 from fire chiefs representing agencies accredited by the Center for Public Safety Excellence® (CPSE®) Commission on Fire Accreditation International® (CFAI®) and those holding the Chief Fire Officer® (CFO) credential from the CPSE Commission on Professional Credentialing® (CPC®).

Survey Respondents

Total distributed: 804
Responses: 149
Response Rate: 18.5%
Total Designated CFOs: 106
From Accredited Department: 85

Service Area Characteristics

Population: 1,500 – 2.2 million
Median: 55,000
Square Miles: 0.7 – 1,704
Median: 43.7
Density (pop. / sq. mi.): 10 – 12,222

| Community Challenge as a Driver | "Somewhat" and "To a Great Extent" |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Behavioral health crises | 91% |
| Repeat 9-1-1 callers / System saturation | 91% |
| Gaps in existing social or health services | 91% |
| Emergency department overuse | 77% |
| Homelessness or housing instability | 74% |
| Safety concerns for first responders | 63% |

Drivers of Interest

Just over 91% of fire chiefs responded with "somewhat" or "to a great extent" when asked if the need to respond to behavioral health crises, manage repeat 9-1-1 callers, and address gaps in existing social or health services were drivers in developing their co-responder program.

Actionable Takeaways

- Conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment.
- Plan for sustainable funding models that reduce reliance on short-term grants.
- Prioritize workforce readiness and support for co-responder personnel.
- Establish clear and measurable program goals.
- Use program data to demonstrate value and inform decision-making.
- Design co-responder programs with adaptability in mind.