

**building bridges:**

**10**

**10 Essential Elements**  
for **Effective Community Partnerships**  
between **Law Enforcement** and **Mental Health**



**nami**

National Alliance on Mental Illness

**Massachusetts**

[www.namimass.org](http://www.namimass.org)

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The NAMI Massachusetts **Criminal Justice Diversion Project** was created with the goal of preventing the unnecessary arrest and detention of individuals with mental illness. This project aims to develop a statewide strategy to make high quality training on mental illness accessible to police departments throughout Massachusetts. The Criminal Justice Diversion Project has four major goals:

- Promote development of high quality police and first responder training programs and specialized response teams on interacting with people with mental illness;
- Identify a stable funding stream for police training and specialized police response teams;
- Build partnerships between local police and community-based human services providers; and,
- Assure that crisis intervention services are accessible and available to everyone who requires them.

The **Taunton Community Crisis Intervention Team (CCIT)** is a community partnership which aims to promote communication and enhance the response of public and private agencies when summoned to intervene with individuals who are mentally ill, developmentally disabled, or experiencing trauma in their lives. The Taunton CCIT holds regular trainings, **community stakeholder meetings**, and case conferences and provides technical assistance to other cities and towns.

The Community-to-Community Mentoring Initiative has provided technical assistance to police departments seeking guidance in developing **community stakeholder meetings** in order to improve their responses to individuals with mental illness. Four communities participated in the piloting of the Community-to-Community Initiative, using the Taunton CCIT as mentors. The Initiative was staffed by Melissa Hirschi, MSW and doctoral student at Boston University School of Social Work. This booklet shares some of the key learning from this project.



# Introduction

Law enforcement officers and the criminal justice system have become the default first responders to individuals living with mental illness in the community. Individuals with mental health conditions are at far greater risk of arrest than the general population, particularly in times of crisis or emotional distress. It is estimated that up to 50% of the inmates in local jails and up to 30% of the inmates in state prisons receive mental health services.

The goals of developing strong community partnerships between law enforcement and mental health providers are to:

- Assure the safety of people with mental illness, police officers, and the public
- Decrease the unnecessary arrest of people with mental illness
- Save the human and financial costs of “criminalizing” people with mental illness
- Link people with community-based services in order to promote recovery

**There is an urgent need to bring together law enforcement officers, mental health providers, and other stakeholders to develop collaborative responses to mental health concerns in the community.**

A major component of these partnership efforts is to organize high quality mental health training programs for police departments, such as **Crisis Intervention Team training (“CIT”)**. Such training teaches literacy and empathy regarding mental illness, and helps officers develop techniques to peacefully de-escalate potentially unsafe situations.

**Building local relationships** between mental health providers, other human services agencies and law enforcement is a critical element in implementing skills learned through training and sustaining these gains over time. **Community stakeholder meetings** develop and nurture relationships, foster sharing of information regarding community resources, and create a space to address problems collaboratively.

The purpose of this booklet is to share ten elements that are key to building and strengthening successful **community stakeholder meetings**.

## know your community

**Community** refers to more than just a geographic region. Your community might include individuals and organizations who share common interests or goals, or who are affected by similar concerns. In terms of addressing local mental health issues, who are the people, groups, and systems who might interact with individuals with mental illness or respond to someone in a psychiatric crisis? Additionally, who are the people whose lives are impacted by mental illness?

These are your **community stakeholders**. When defining your community, think as broadly as possible so as to include as many stakeholders as possible.



## assure police buy-in

**Police officers** are often the first responders when individuals in the community are in emotional crisis or at risk due to mental health symptoms. The police are critically important stakeholders and must have a presence in and commitment to **community stakeholder meetings**. Indeed, when police take a leadership role in developing and sustaining these groups, they are more likely to thrive. It is crucial to reach out to the police as soon as possible; the best way in which to do this will vary depending on the particular structure and culture of the police department in your community.

An important first step is to connect with a **police champion** who is passionate about working with the community. This might be a Community Service Officer, an Outreach Officer, the Chief, or any officer who understands importance of interacting responsively and humanely with people with mental illness. This officer can help to obtain necessary buy-in from the Chief and other officers within the department. It is important to emphasize the fact that **working together will be beneficial to all**.

### Benefits to police departments from community stakeholder meetings:

- **Police officers become safer.**
  - Having collaborative responses, where police officers work together with mental health providers, can reduce officer injuries in the field.
- **Police departments save time and money.**
  - Better communication and coordination with other systems.
  - Fewer repeat calls to the same address.
  - Less time spent waiting with individuals in emergency rooms.
  - Less time and more appropriate outcomes than unnecessary arrests.

## develop relationships

Community collaboration is all about **relationships**! Build and strengthen the relationships with your community stakeholders by trusting and respecting each member of your group. Relationships will also grow when partners hold each other **accountable** and take **responsibility** as you progress towards a shared vision.

Partners need to know that these meetings are not about receiving extra work from other organizations, but about bringing together community resources to make everyone's work more efficient and effective. Involving community partners increases commitment to the community as a whole. Without strong relationships, however, the partnerships will not succeed.

## enlist bridge builders

**Bridge builders** are individuals who can “translate” between the worlds of law enforcement and mental health. They are the people who are willing to take the first step in reaching out to different circles and

systems, and engaging people around a shared vision. Bridge builders can be a police officer who is particularly attuned to the needs of people with mental illness, a mental health clinician who works in the courts or criminal justice settings or a probation officer or attorney who works on mental health issues. Bridge builders can help diffuse conflict by interpreting the languages of different systems and helping the group communicate in language that is accessible to all. This helps to clear up misunderstandings and bring everyone onto the same page. Bridge builders may also increase awareness of and access to community resources.

A possible first project of your Community Stakeholders Group could be a contact list of all stakeholders which can be laminated and posted or carried in a wallet. Knowing who to call in a crisis and having easy access on how to reach them is a valuable tool in relationship building.

## define needs & mission

Each community has a unique set of needs, as well as their own individual strengths that can be leveraged to meet these needs. It is crucial for a community partnership to **define the community's needs and the mission of the group**. Without this groundwork, efforts to maintain and sustain community collaboration will likely fizzle. Agreeing upon a shared need and mission or goal will keep the group together and on the same page. The needs and mission can change, and your community partnership should be flexible enough to allow for this through an active process of re-evaluation. Maintaining a common understanding of shared goals is key in order for the group to stay on task, stay focused, and not waste valuable time and resources!

### Sample mission statement: CCIT Taunton

A genuine community partnership, the mission of the Community Crisis Intervention Team is two-fold. Principally it exists to promote communication and enhance the response of public and private agencies when summoned to intervene with individuals who are mentally ill, developmentally disabled or experiencing trauma in their lives. Secondly, team members are specifically trained and equipped to assist other communities in their quest of identifying the components and collaboration necessary to replicate a similar Community Crisis Intervention Team initiative of their own.

## identify a single point of contact

Don't underestimate the value of having a **single point of contact** for your community partnership. Think of this single point person as the hub on a wheel from which all spokes are connected. This person can streamline communication and take the lead in helping to move the community partnership forward. The form of the point person's role may vary—the role can rotate or remain constant; the group might choose this person collectively, or a stakeholder or volunteer might volunteer, or the group might develop another method for defining a point person. Regardless of the specifics, this single point of contact should be someone who is approachable and accessible, and who the other stakeholders feel comfortable contacting.

## communicate

As with all relationships, **communication** is extremely important in **community stakeholder meetings**. Developing effective communication skills is an ongoing

process that is a necessary foundation to a partnership's work. Healthy, open, and respectful communication can strengthen your partnership. It is particularly important to discuss the communication style of the group's meetings in order to ensure that all voices have equal time and weight.

Another component of communication that is important to consider is that of **information sharing** between law enforcement, mental health, and other organizations. Different stakeholders will have their own existing guidelines and rules about information sharing. It is important to openly discuss the parameters around information sharing so that the group can reach an understanding and consensus for **how, when, where, and why** information will be shared.



## establish regular, continuous meetings

Once partnerships have begun to form and stakeholders are coming together to work on shared needs and goals, it is important for the group to commit to a **regular timeframe for meetings**. If the group lacks a regular meeting schedule, it is too easy for other activities and assignments to “come up” and take the place of a meeting. A general way to start might be to schedule a monthly meeting for your community partnership. Knowing that all have committed to attending will help keep stakeholders accountable to one another, and more likely to maintain steady attendance. **Community stakeholder meetings** should also occur in a central location, ideally somewhere accessible such as a police station, community center, or library. This will help to ensure that everyone is at the table and that all have an equal and active voice.

### Another option:

Hold large quarterly meetings with all of your stakeholders, with smaller “working groups” that meet monthly or more to address specific issues, such as crisis response or streamlining interactions between police and local hospitals.

## foster sustainability & commitment

If community stakeholders come together for a shared purpose and goal, work on communicating, build bridges, and hold regular meetings, these community partnerships can be **sustainable**. Making a **commitment** on an individual level as well as an organizational level to the community partnerships is key. In order to do this, it is important to recruit the right people who have both the **organizational support** and the **personal conviction** to commit to the community partnership.

Another piece that can help with sustainability of the community partnership is to find **funding resources**. These resources can fund training programs, travel to educational conferences, or organizational commitment to cover the salary and time of an individual member. Funding for community partnerships will go a long way in helping demonstrate the commitment and fostering sustainability.


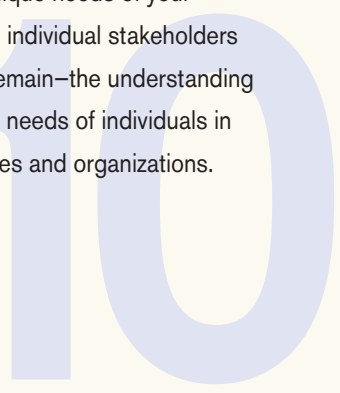
As time passes and relationships grow,  
partnerships will become more effective.



## embrace the journey

**Community stakeholder meetings** are a **journey**, not an event. You don't have to have all of the answers right now. As members of the partnership gain a clearer understanding of their individual roles and come together as a group, the partnership will gain momentum towards effectively addressing community issues.

Your community partnership will grow and evolve. This is a good thing! Maintain a **team approach** and remember that your community partnership is bigger than even those at the table. The overall goal is to meet the unique needs of your community. These needs will change, and so too may the individual stakeholders of your meetings. However, one element should always remain—the understanding that this is a journey whose purpose is to better meet the needs of individuals in your community by working collaboratively across agencies and organizations.





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## Resources

### National Alliance on Mental Illness:

#### **CIT Toolkit:** Community Partnerships

<http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=CIT&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=67309>

### Bureau of Justice Assistance:

#### **Statewide Law Enforcement/Mental Health Efforts:**

Strategies to Support and Sustain Local Initiatives

[https://www.bja.gov/Publications/CSG\\_StatewideLEMH.pdf](https://www.bja.gov/Publications/CSG_StatewideLEMH.pdf)

#### **Improving Responses to People with Mental Illnesses:**

Tailoring Law Enforcement Initiatives to Individual Jurisdictions

[https://www.bja.gov/Publications/CSG\\_LE\\_Tailoring.pdf](https://www.bja.gov/Publications/CSG_LE_Tailoring.pdf)

### International Association of Chiefs of Police

#### **Building Safer Communities:**

Improving Police Response to Persons with Mental Illness

<http://www.theiacp.org/portals/0/pdfs/ImprovingPoliceResponseToPersonsWithMentalIllnessSummit.pdf>