

Building Community Safety: Eight Ideas for State Policy Action



1. **Pass legislation to create a Division of Community Safety, housed within your state Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees a wide range of non-carceral safety grants.**

Why? As interest in non-carceral safety approaches grows, states need a permanent institution—totally divorced from the criminal-legal system—to manage these new investments. Creating this Division would add rigor and expertise to this new field while embodying a much-needed paradigm shift.

Key points?

- Ensure that this agency is NOT housed in the Department of Justice or any other carceral institution. Its non-carceral orientation is key to ensure both a true paradigm shift *and* community buy-in.
- Try to move non-carceral grant programs, including the ones listed here, to this new agency—especially if they are currently being run by the Department of Justice.
- As its first grant, prioritize a funding stream that can *flexibly* go toward community safety, rather than targeted programs. This lets local advocates determine what they think will best address their safety needs.

Where to turn? See [this policy guide](#) for a model policy. If you would like to join a state lawmaker cohort that will be introducing aligned legislation this cycle, email thea@civilrightscorps.org.

- 2. Create a grant program, ideally administered by the new Division of Community Safety, which will fund alternative approaches to traffic enforcement—approaches that do not rely on police.**

Why? Traffic stops are the most common way that police and the public interact—and given the scope of police violence during these encounters, represent a significant risk especially to Black and Indigenous individuals. State governments have a unique capacity to supercharge efforts that would pilot and ultimately scale non-carceral traffic enforcement.

Key points?

- Provide resources that can be used both for a planning phase that involves convening local stakeholders, finding the approach that best suits local stakeholders, and for implementing the approach.
- Be sure that plans consider the following elements—street redesign to reduce dangerous driving behaviors; decriminalization of low-level traffic offenses; bans on pretextual stops; and moving traffic enforcement to an unarmed non-carceral agency.

Where to turn? For a guide to establishing non-police traffic enforcement models, see [this resource](#) by Livable Streets, which includes suggestions for different divisions of state and local governments, as well as policy-by-policy decision making frameworks.

- 3. Create a grant program, ideally administered by the new Division of Community Safety, which will fund non-carceral crisis response.**

Why? Non-carceral crisis response programs are an underutilized resource to help protect our most vulnerable individuals when they are experiencing crises. These programs have shown extraordinary results, saving thousands of lives that are otherwise lost when police officers respond to situations that are far outside of their expertise.

Key points?

- Ensure that programs are truly non-carceral, not co-responder models that leave a significant role for police involvement.
- Ensure that grant restrictions are not so restrictive as to leave small, community-led organizations from benefiting.

Where to turn? Consider [ARPA](#), [988 Implementation grants](#), and other sources of federal funding that may be used for non-carceral crisis response. For assistance identifying existing sources of federal funding, please contact thea@civilrightscorps.org. Also, see [Interrupting Criminalization](#)'s guide to mental health responders so that you can gather best practices for starting these programs.

- 4. Create a grant program, ideally administered by the new Division of Community Safety, which will fund local governments to establish non-carceral “Community**

Safety Agencies” or “Offices of Neighborhood Safety” that conduct Safety Needs Assessments, then develop action plans to address these needs.

Why? To catalyze and sustainably fund programs that prevent violence and harm before they happen, local jurisdictions need dedicated agencies that can oversee non-carceral investments in safety—entities that have deep community involvement and leadership while being fully independent of carceral structures. These entities can manage Safety Needs Assessments and non-carceral safety investments while helping such investments sustain and grow long-term.

Key points?

- Require that these agencies be non-carceral rather than affiliated with a carceral entity.
- Require that these entities have strong community oversight and leadership.

Where to turn? See [this policy guide](#) for suggested legislative language for establishing these grants, as well as this guide for [local lawmakers](#) on starting these offices and conducting Safety Needs Assessments.

5. Set aside resources for “participatory budgeting for community safety” programs in high-need communities.

Why? Individual neighborhoods know best what they need to feel safe. Consequently, state lawmakers should set aside dollars for “participatory budgeting for community safety” in selected neighborhoods statewide—or to local governments so that they can manage these local projects. Funded projects would need to be non-carceral, but could otherwise go to whatever programs, services, or infrastructure investments would best address local residents’ safety concerns.

Key points?

- Ensure that enough funding is set aside so projects can be consistently maintained, rather than using a “demonstration” or “pilot model.” This approach will better ensure long-term buy-in from residents.
- Have policy and communications staff provide technical and research assistance to participants, but ensure that all decision making is done by residents.

Where to turn? To learn more about “participatory budgeting for safety,” see [this toolkit](#) based on the work that has been happening in Arizona schools. For more resources, technical assistance, and examples of participatory budgeting projects, visit the [Participatory Budgeting Project](#).

6. Rally other lawmakers around a broad “Futures Agenda” that invests robustly in youth safety.

Why? The current moment holds a nearly unprecedented challenge for kids. COVID-19 has disrupted lives worldwide, leaving youth to navigate shuttered schools, social isolation, and a lack of basic needs—and while they struggle to weather these issues, concerns around violence have

triggered a “tough on crime” political surge that could cause further criminalization of our most vulnerable kids. Now, more than ever, our youth need a forward-looking policy agenda that can keep them truly safe and counteract this dangerous trend.

Key points?

- Package a wide range of high-impact social policies—ranging from paid leave, universal school meals, and mentorship programs to summer jobs and school-based clinics—into five domains: Safe Foundations; Safe & Supportive Schools; Safe Streets; Safe Futures; and Safe Communities.
- Find lawmakers to champion each aligned bill, but package these bills together into a common “Futures Agenda.” Use this bill to play offense, not defense, on supporting rather than criminalizing youth.

Where to turn? Please contact thea@civilrightscorps.org for more information.

7. Unlock untapped resources for funding community safety.

Why? Several of the proposals described here, as well as many other needed investments not listed here, will require significant and stable funding. It is imperative that states and local jurisdictions rely on progressive, equity-enhancing revenue raisers rather than turning to mechanisms like criminal-legal fines and fees—which are shown to [increase police contact](#), [reduce safety](#), and be [highly inefficient](#) at raising funds. Identifying federal funding sources will be a key step in ensuring that community safety investments are made in an equitable and sustainable manner.

Key Points?

- Identify resources such as Medicaid, The American Rescue Plan, the infrastructure bill, 988 implementation funding, and other legislation that can go toward non-carceral first responders, social housing, mental health care, and other safety needs.
- Propose a bill that would use technical assistance, incentive grants, and other state funding to help, encourage, and even require jurisdictions to reduce and/or eliminate their reliance on fines and fees. Consider working with legislators who are interested in economic development, immigration, or other cross-cutting issues.
- Propose legislation that would match any money unlocked by reducing criminal-legal expenditures, provided that such dollars are then invested in non-carceral social supports and community safety programming.

Where to Turn? See these guides on utilizing the [American Rescue Plan](#) and the [infrastructure bill](#) for community safety, and [this resource](#) on how 988 can be used for non-carceral crisis response. To find more promising federal grant programs, contact thea@civilrightscorps.org. For information on how and why policymakers should reduce reliance on criminal fines and fees, the [Fines and Fees Justice Center](#) has a wealth of research, toolkits, policy recommendations, and examples for state lawmakers.

8. Unlock additional resources to examine the “social determinants of safety.”

Why? Genuine community safety can only be achieved through a preventative, health-based approach. The “social determinants of safety” model provides a useful framework for stopping violence and harm *before* they happen by addressing factors such as education, healthcare access, housing, and the prevalence of weapons and other instruments that can be used to cause harm.

Key Points?

- Encourage the state Department of Health and Human Services to specify that all funding for addressing the “social determinants of health” can include projects that would further the social determinants of safety—and specifying that no project can be linked to the criminal-legal system.
- Fund a research initiative, ideally led by the new Division of Community Safety, which would coordinate research into non-carceral programs and interventions that address the social determinants of safety.
- Working with other lawmakers, create a funding stream that would fund community-based organizations identifying and addressing the social determinants of safety.

Where to turn? Please contact thea@civilrightscorps.org for more information. For more resources regarding public safety as a public health issue, see [Human Impact Partners](#).



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