

# INNOVATION SPOTLIGHT: Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD)



Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD®) is a police-led diversion program designed to connect people with substance use disorders and/or mental health needs with social services rather than funnel them into the criminal justice system. LEAD allows law enforcement officers to redirect people suspected of committing specific, low-level crimes, including drug-related offenses, to community-based services rather than to jail. The primary goal of the LEAD program is to improve public safety by addressing the underlying factors that drive criminal justice contact.

## How LEAD Works

A law enforcement officer may identify a LEAD-eligible individual through two avenues: upon arrest for specific, low-level crimes or through a social contact referral. A “social contact referral” means that the officer does not have probable cause to arrest the person, but rather has reason to believe that this person may benefit from the LEAD program. Once identified, the officer refers the person to a case manager rather than arresting and/or transporting him or her to jail for booking. If the referred individual was identified in the course of committing an eligible offense, he or she has 30 days after referral to complete a case management assessment, or an arrest warrant will be issued. Around 90 percent of those referred to LEAD enroll in the program.

“LEAD is about providing police officers with another tool in order to deal with the myriad of circumstances they encounter on a daily basis. Rather than just arrest or walk away, LEAD provides officers a third option, which in many cases, is the best option.”

Keith Brown,  
Albany LEAD Project Director  
Katal Center

Once enrolled in LEAD, the participant works closely with a case manager to identify his or her needs and get connected to the appropriate service providers. The program is not exclusively focused on providing addiction treatment or mental health treatment. For some participants, housing and reliable access to food may be the most pressing needs.

## Building LEAD

LEAD was launched in King County, Washington, in October 2011 with support from the Ford and Open Society Foundations. The program was first piloted in the Belltown neighborhood in Seattle, and later expanded to include other West and East precinct

*Focus on Innovation: series highlights programs across the country that contribute to a comprehensive strategy to combat addiction.*

neighborhoods and Skyway area in King County. Full coverage for Seattle and King County is now planned, and the program is now entirely publicly funded.

Following the program's success in Washington, LEAD has been implemented in several other jurisdictions. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, policymakers formed a task force in 2012 to discuss the viability of LEAD, and soon after, they piloted the program. By April 2014, the program was fully implemented. Program coordinators hold trainings on the program three to four times per year.

In Albany, New York, LEAD was launched in April 2016, and is available jurisdiction-wide. Sworn officers of the Albany Police Department have received training in harm reduction and LEAD, and in the fall of 2016, program and Albany Police Department staff started training new recruits at the police academy.

### Eligibility Criteria

In King County and in Santa Fe, anyone suspected of a low-level drug or prostitution offense may be eligible for LEAD. However, those individuals who have previously committed certain violent crimes or who are believed to have engaged in other specified criminal conduct, such as the exploitation of minors, are excluded from arrest diversion. In Santa Fe, anyone under state probation supervision at the time of police contact is also excluded from participation. In King County, arrest diversion is now contemplated for other crimes.

In Albany, stakeholders have adopted a broader set of eligibility criteria: if an individual's contact with the police is driven by drug use, mental illness, poverty, or any combination of the three, then that person is eligible for LEAD. Therefore, in addition to drug-related offenses, LEAD is also available, for example,



to someone who may have trespassed due to homelessness, who was in the midst of a non-life threatening mental health crisis, or who shoplifted baby formula.

### Demonstrating Success

In King County, the LEAD program administrators are committed to ensuring the program's effectiveness in reducing law violations. In order to do that, they have partnered with researchers from the University of Washington to evaluate the program across several metrics, including its impact on participants' drug use and subsequent criminal activity as well as its cost effectiveness. The evaluation was funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

In a report from 2015, which focused on recidivism, the researchers found that LEAD participants were 58 percent less likely to be arrested when compared to a control group not involved in the program, and 34 percent less likely to be arrested for a new offense. Researchers also found that, as compared with the control group, LEAD participants were 39 percent less likely to be charged with a felony after enrolling in the program. These

results demonstrate that connecting people to community-based services, rather than booking them into jail, is not only better for the individual but also improves public order and safety.

The program in Albany is still too new to report outcome data, but stakeholders are keeping track of program participants, and hope to report not only on criminal justice outcomes but also on reductions in preventable healthcare and emergency service utilization.

Program coordinators in Santa Fe have recently identified a third party organization to help conduct an evaluation of the program, which they expect will demonstrate its success. To date, none of the program participants in Santa Fe have been rearrested for a serious crime.

## Stakeholders & Partners

In order for LEAD to be successful, the law enforcement agency must develop a strong partnership with a local community services organization to provide case management services to program participants.

Additionally, program coordinators engage and collaborate with a diverse group of stakeholders who are dedicated to creating an alternative to how law enforcement responds to people with substance use disorders. These stakeholders include, but are not limited to: local executive branch offices, such as the Office of the Mayor or the County Executive; prosecutors and the defense bar; community advocacy groups; and social welfare organizations.

## The Future of LEAD

As of February 2017, LEAD has also taken root in Sante Fe (NM), Huntington (WV), Albany (NY), Fayetteville (NC), Baltimore (MD), and Portland (OR). Additional cities planning to launch LEAD in 2017 include Madison (WI), San Francisco (CA), Stockton (CA) and several

“To create a truly successful community-based initiative, everyone who has skin in the game must be at the table and remain at the table, always providing care and attention to the initiative.”

Jim Pugel, Chief Deputy  
King County Sheriff’s Office

other cities in California and North Carolina, with Atlanta (GA) and New Orleans (LA) launching pre-booking diversion programs that incorporate LEAD principles. The LEAD National Support Bureau provides nationwide technical support, and a multi-site evaluation is in planning stages.

Across the country, the criminal justice community has taken great interest in how to best respond to people with substance use disorders while maintaining public safety. Since its implementation, LEAD has proven to be a promising practice that addresses these concerns. The LEAD program has the capacity not only to affect those individuals who participate, but also to reframe the way law enforcement interacts with this population.

***LEAD® is a registered trademark held by the Public Defender Association for the Seattle/King County LEAD Policy Coordinating Group.***

## Resources & References

LEAD® King County website: [leadkingcounty.org](http://leadkingcounty.org)

LEAD® National Support Bureau website: <http://www.leadbureau.org>

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*Innovative Lead Program is Showing Success*, American Civil Liberties Union of Washington State (April 8, 2015), <https://aclu-wa.org/news/innovative-lead-program-showing-success>.

