Austin Police Department's Early Intervention System for Officers

Objective

Does Austin Police Department's early intervention system for officers track the appropriate indicators, proactively surface areas of concern, and effectively connect officers with wellness resources?

Background

Police departments use early intervention systems (EIS) to identify officers who may need additional support to do their jobs safely and effectively.

Implemented in 2006, the Austin Police Department's (APD) early intervention system is called the Guidance Advisory Program (GAP). APD's GAP currently tracks three indicators: Response-to-Resistance (more commonly referred to as "use-of-force"), Internal Affairs complaints, and use of sick leave.

When an officer crosses the preset threshold for one of these indicators, the officer "activates" in the system. Police management is then alerted that the officer may need additional support or intervention.

What We Found

The Austin Police Department's early intervention system does not fulfill its mission to effectively identify officers who may need assistance and connect officers to support services. This is caused by significant data collection and reporting issues and not using the system to connect officers to services. In addition, the department does not track or monitor the program's success.

We also found APD has not generated buy-in, provided necessary training, or created transparency to support use of the GAP. The U.S. Department of Justice recommends seven elements for a successful EIS. Below is a summary of these elements and APD's implementation of them.

Department of Justice Best Practices for Early Intervention Systems	APD is not aligned with Best Practices for Early Intervention Systems
Processes Establish processes to ensure proper administration of the program	APD has established processes for the GAP, but the program is not effective or working as intended
Data Collection Program data should be broad and include positive and negative indicators	Data tools do not pull all the needed information and more than a third of activations were missed for fiscal year 2020
Support Services The program should provide the right support services to address identified issues	The GAP does not connect officers to support services even though APD has many of the recommended services
Monitoring & Improvement The program should be continuously monitored and evaluated for improvement	There is minimal reporting on GAP activations and no trend analysis, tracking, or evaluation
Buy-In Generate program "buy-in" at all levels of the department	APD staff have not fully bought-in to the GAP
Training All members of the department should understand how to use the program	GAP training is minimal and not provided regularly
Transparency Ensure all stakeholders understand how the program works	The purpose of the GAP and how it works is not clear to all users

Source: Auditor analysis of Austin Police Department 2020 General Orders related to the Guidance Advisory Program, April 2021

APD's Early Intervention System for Officers

What We Found, Continued

Additional Observation: The GAP may not track the right amount or type of indicators and the thresholds for existing indicators may not be set at appropriate levels.

- Other cities appear to track significantly more indicators than APD inlcuding Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio (see below). The Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania early intervention system tracks 18 indicators.

- APD's performance indicator thresholds may be too low and result in unnecessary activations.

- More recent, data-driven EIS programs generally track more than 20 indicators. These programs claim to be predictive and able to identify officers in need of support.

Peer city early intervention systems track more indicators than Austin

City & Program	Austin - Guidance Advisory Program	Dallas - Employee Success Program	Houston - Early Warning System	San Antonio - Officer Concern Program
# of Indicators	3	6	10	5
Indicators	Response-to-Resistance Internal Affairs complaints Use of sick leave	Use-of-force complaints Internal Affairs-investigated complaints Summary discipline Criminal activity complaints AWOL from work or court Supervisory Review	Excessive use-of-force Misconduct including racial profiling Citizen injuries or deaths Citizen complaints Vehicle crashes City property damage Disregard for policies or procedures Low performance Extra employment violations Other factors identified by supervisor	Internal Affairs complaints Chain-of-command complaints Criminal activity complaints Chargeable city vehicle crashes Driving-related complaints

Source: Auditor analysis of early intervention programs based on available information, June 2021

What We Recommend

The Chief of Police should:

- Work with staff to identify and implement fixes for the existing data collection issues so the Guidance Advisory Program appropriately identifies officers.

- Work with stakeholders to create the necessary culture to generate buy-in and support the use of the Guidance Advisory Program or its successor, including timely training and clear communication so the process is transparent, understood, and consistently applied. This effort should align with the Department of Justice's early intervention system best practices.

- Work with stakeholders to review and update the Guidance Advisory Program's performance indicators and thresholds and ensure that wellness programs and services are identified to meet officers' needs. This effort should align with the Department of Justice's early intervention system best practices.

- Ensure the revised early intervention program is implemented with the appropriate resources so it is effectively. administered, monitored and evaluated. This effort should align with the Department of Justice's early intervention system best practices.