

MEMO

TO: Honorable Members of the Boston City Council and interested parties
FROM: City of Boston's Coordinated Response Team
DATE: February 26, 2025
RE: Update on Ongoing Efforts to End Congregate Substance Use in Boston

This memo on the City of Boston's Coordinated Response activities and goals is provided to the Boston City Council under Section 1, City of Boston Code, Ordinances, § 16-65.10.

As the warm weather season of 2025 approaches, the City is committed to addressing safety, health, and quality of life for residents with **a goal to end congregate substance use in neighborhoods of Boston and the criminal activity that supports it**. Since November 2023, City policies and investments, including significant expansion of low-threshold shelter and housing, public health staffing, and active policing, have largely succeeded in keeping a permanent tent encampment from reestablishing. Nevertheless, active groups of individuals engaged in congregate substance use and dealing undermine quality of life in city neighborhoods, particularly in the Downtown and Boston Common, Roxbury, the South End and parts of Dorchester and South Boston, and hinder ongoing efforts to connect individuals to addiction and recovery services and treatment. Our goal is to end this congregation. The city's multi-faceted approach for the past three years has been a continuous process of adapting to changing dynamics on the ground.

We view this report to the Boston City Council as an opportunity to share updates from City departments that reflect adjustments in our coordinated response with the goal to end congregate use through 1) co-response and diversion, 2) active enforcement of drug laws, 3) enhanced street cleaning and needle pickup, 4) a shift in delivery of harm reduction away from congregate sites, and 5) collaboration with neighbors to continuously assess our progress and adapt our strategies.

The City considers this ***an adaptable point-in-time update, and NOT a plan set in stone***, and will continue to work closely with leaders in impacted neighborhoods to iterate and respond to changing circumstances on the ground. We will also work collaboratively on metrics to assess successes and areas for continued improvement, including census counts and evaluation of 911 and 311 calls.

The Coordinated Response Team and affiliated departments will continue to meet regularly with neighborhood groups as we get into the spring and summer of 2025, and expect to make implementation adjustments as we continue to receive feedback on the ground.

Background:

The closure of the Long Island Bridge in 2014 displaced many programs providing social services, shelter for individuals experiencing homelessness, and treatment for individuals with substance use disorder. Operated by the Boston Public Health Commission, the [campus](#) once included 742 shelter beds and 225 recovery beds. In response to the closure, the City opened the men's shelter at 112 Southamptton Street, near the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard (Mass & Cass). The long-running ongoing opioid epidemic, exacerbated by the increasing presence of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids and pandemic disruption increased the number of unsheltered individuals to record levels. By the time Mayor Wu was elected to office in November 2021, there were more than 90 [identified tents and fortified structures](#) in the area, ultimately resulting in a threat to public health and safety.

Since November of 2021, under Mayor Wu's leadership, the City's Coordinated Response Team (CRT) and many affiliated Departments including the Boston Police Department (BPD), the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC), the Mayor's Office of Housing (MOH), and the Department of Public Works (DPW), have worked collectively to address the impacts on public safety, public health and neighborhood quality of life resulting from unsheltered homelessness, co-occurring mental health and substance use challenges and congregate outdoor substance use and related criminal activity in the neighborhoods around the intersection of Mass & Cass, as well as other areas of Boston.

At Mayor Wu's direction, in January of 2022, the City carried out a public health-led emergency response at the encampment near Mass & Cass. This effort included a housing surge that transitioned over 145 individuals into shelter and housing from November 2021 to January 2022 at [six low threshold sites](#). These sites included new low threshold beds inside BPHC's [emergency shelters](#), Woods Mullen and Southamptton Street, as well as City-funded and state-funded sites, which helped to significantly reduce the unsheltered population. Since January 2022, the low-threshold shelters have taken in over 650 individuals and supported housing pathways for over 230 of these individuals. Additionally, these sites helped contribute to a temporary end to the quasi-permanent encampment at Atkinson Street.

When the encampment on Atkinson Street reemerged, the City determined that tents, tarps, and other enclosures were impeding our collective efforts to keep individuals housed in City shelters and other low threshold sites and were contributing to violence and criminal activity in the neighborhoods. With Fall weather approaching, in September of 2023, Mayor Wu announced a phase change involving three related measures to curtail the heavy crowds, increasing criminal activity and unsanitary conditions on Atkinson Street, and to close the permanent encampment.

First, the City filed [An Ordinance Related to Unlawful Camping on Public Property](#) with the Boston City Council, which passed on October 25, 2023. The Ordinance empowered the BPD and other officials to prohibit the tents, tarps, and other temporary structures, which were shielding dangerous activity in the area and undermining recovery services, provided that the City offered shelter, storage of belongings, and transportation. Second, Mayor Wu and the BPHC brought online additional shelter beds in a temporary overnight space. Third, the BPD provided an increased presence on Atkinson Street and in the area, which remains to this day. Implementing the new approach involved months of preparation and cross-department collaboration. By the time the Ordinance went into effect, on November 1, 2023, no individuals living on Atkinson Street remained without placement. To date, the City has made no arrest tied solely to the encampment ordinance. We have successfully sheltered 218 individuals who have accepted shelter and services pursuant to the Ordinance policy.

Over the course of 2024, public health and public safety officials from CRT, BPD, and BPHC worked together to enforce the Ordinance and keep Boston a tent-free and encampment-free City. A BPHC survey in fall 2024 found that a significant majority (83%) of individuals in the Mass & Cass area reported staying in shelter, their own house, or with family or friends immediately before coming to the area. Following enforcement of the Ordinance and the closure of the encampment on Atkinson Street, BPD also reported a significant decrease in violent crime in the area (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Changes in violence crime by type year before and year after encampment

Mass Ave. / Melnea Cass Area - Violent Crime				
November 1 - October 29, 2022-2023 v. 2023-2024				
Crime Category	22/23	23/24	Change	Percent Reduction
Homicide	2	0	-2	100%
Rape & Attempted	17	7	-10	59%
Robbery	68	53	-15	22%
Aggravated Assault	157	120	-37	24%
Total Violent Crime	244	180	-64	26%

Total numbers of individuals around Mass & Cass also dropped significantly following the closure of the Atkinson Street encampment, falling from June 2023 levels of 134-200 daily to June 2024 levels of 30-90 daily. In August of 2024, the state closed the low threshold cottages at the Shattuck and ended state funding for the EnVision Hotel site in December of 2024. In late 2024, the City agreed to assume primary responsibility for funding EnVision

and, most recently, in January of 2025, Mayor Wu [announced](#) that the site will continue to operate as a low threshold shelter until becoming permanent supportive housing.

Notwithstanding the significant progress in housing individuals, reducing violent crime, decreasing the average crowd size at Mass and Cass and keeping Boston encampment-free, new congregations of outdoor substance users, and related activity, emerged as the most pressing issue impacting quality of life for residents citywide, particularly in the Downtown and Boston Common, Roxbury, the South End and parts of Dorchester and South Boston. After a sustained period without significant crowding from November 2023 thru early April 2024, congregate outdoor substance use emerged as a daily challenge at the Mass & Cass intersection, the surrounding areas, and in areas of downtown Boston. Until colder weather late in 2024, the City experienced an increase in 311 calls for needle pickup, human waste, and other impacts on quality of life, and more individuals congregating and in need of recovery services.

In late 2024, led by CRT, the City redefined our coordinated strategy around the goal of ending congregate substance use and drug related activities in Boston, and connecting all individuals with addiction services.

With a focus on improving quality of life for all residents, we will work with neighborhood leaders to implement the following shifts in strategy to stop future congregation and drug related activity **wherever** it occurs in Boston. We expect to meet regularly with neighborhood leaders to adapt these measures in response to changing circumstances on the ground.

Citywide 2025 Strategy: Ending congregate substance use in Boston

To achieve the City's goal of ending congregate substance use and related criminal activity in Boston neighborhoods, and connecting individuals to recovery services and treatment, the City will implement a set of updated strategies, led by the core teams working on the ground, CRT, BPD and BPHC, with accompanying metrics to evaluate success and areas for improvement. **Implementation measures and metrics will be reviewed and revised in response to neighborhood feedback and changing circumstances.**

Strategic Updates led by the Coordinated Response Team:

1. *Daily coordinating and increased staffing to address needs in real time*

The City is using grants and funds available through repurposing open positions to expand the CRT team, led by Kellie Young, a former member of the Boston Emergency Services Team at Boston Medical Center's Criminal Justice Diversion Program. CRT has primary

responsibility for arranging preventative co-response, implementing the Ordinance, triaging and responding to 311 requests and constituent calls related to congregate outdoor substance use and drug related activity. CRT coordinates a daily 9:00am call with leaders from BPHC and BPD to implement proactive co-response and coordinate the response to 311 calls, and actively participates in a BPD-led HUB model to identify individuals with elevated risk. CRT also serves as a primary point of contact for community members in the Mass and Cass area and other city areas impacted by congregate use.

2. Implement a co-response strategy with law enforcement

CRT will oversee implementation of an enhanced preventative co-response strategy with BPD and other law enforcement partners, prioritizing deflection and diversionary measures that connect high need individuals with recovery services and treatment. BPHC will support access to treatment pathways and transportation. CRT-led co-response will advance alternatives to the criminal justice system that provide substance use disorder and mental health related treatment, including Services over Sentences (SOS), a North Suffolk Community Services program supported by the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office and the Commonwealth.

3. Draw on community partners for strategy and implementation

CRT will lead working groups with the community leaders citywide, including the South End, Downtown, and Newmarket and Nubian Square, to closely track the success in curtailing congregate use and drug related activity and to advise on adjustments to the City's efforts in the area.

CRT will convene community, city and state partners to discuss regional needs for addiction and recovery services and strategize around ways to meet those needs. CRT, BPD, and BPHC will engage all local organizations on strategies to connect individuals with recovery services and treatment, and end congregate outdoor substance use, dealing, and related criminal activity in Boston.

Public Safety Strategic Updates:

4. BPD will increase deployments and coordination in the broader Mass and Cass area and other congregate sites, with supervision from the Bureau of Field Services (BFS)

Three different BPD Districts share a boundary in the Mass and Cass area, B2 (Roxbury), C6 (South Boston), and D4 (South End). Moving forward, during each shift, staffing will include dedicated deployments of officers from the Districts, with enhanced coordination and

additional support provided by a BFS supervisor. Through BFS, BPD will marshal the significant resources deployed daily to implement co-response and achieve the City's goals of curtailing congregate use and criminal activity.

5. Expand Street Outreach Unit Coverage and Focus

The officers of the BPD [Street Outreach Unit \(SOU\)](#) have special training to support individuals with mental health and substance use disorders. With additional staffing, SOU will expand its coverage capacity to seven days/week and lead the BPD efforts to develop the necessary documentation to enable successful Section 12s and Section 35s (involuntary commitments) which can be an important tool in connecting individuals with the recovery services they need. Additionally, officers who have received the 40 hour Critical Incident Training, but are not assigned to SOU, will be available on a volunteer basis to respond to incidents when additional BPD support is necessary.

6. Increase Enforcement of Drug Related Activity

In addition to uniformed officers currently assigned to the Mass and Cass area, BPD will prioritize the assignment of officers at sites of congregate use to conduct active enforcement of criminal law violations, including drug related criminal behavior.

Public Health Strategic Updates:

The [Boston Public Health Commission](#) plays a key role in the substance use response in the City by providing low-threshold shelter and housing pathways, life-saving harm reduction services, and recovery services.

7. Continue Low-threshold Shelter and Housing Access

Low-threshold shelter and permanent housing have been vital to providing safe, stabilizing spaces for people who have been chronically unsheltered with substance use disorder in the City. To address overnight congregating, BPHC will continue to fund and oversee 147 low-threshold shelter beds and provide permanent housing navigation to individuals in these spaces. BPHC's emergency shelters have also expanded harm reduction policies and practices that support people with substance use disorder.

8. Expand Treatment Access and Pathways

Through our PAATHS program, we will increase PAATHS treatment access during outreach routes, at our homeless shelters, and in the low-threshold shelters to help people complete

treatment pathways assessments and provide transportation to help people access treatment. Through our partnerships with our partners, we will continue to expand access to medication for opioid use disorder, proven interventions to stabilize people and save lives.

9. Citywide Response to Address Needs

BPHC's Recovery Services Outreach Team conducts daily morning and end of day routes to respond to proactively address any needs of unsheltered persons and syringe clean-up on schools and park property. Beginning in January 2025, the team is responding to incidents and 311 calls citywide. Based on trusted relationships with people who are often on the streets, the outreach team provides referrals and transports to treatment and services. The outreach team will increase the number of business visits in the hotspots of the City to provide overdose prevention education and information on responding to any concerns related to unsheltered persons with substance use disorder.

10. Focus Harm Reduction Services at Indoor Locations

BPHC and provider partners play a critical role in providing harm reduction and clinical services to prevent overdose and the transmission of infectious diseases, including HIV and hepatitis C. To direct existing harm reduction services indoors and away from congregate sites, BPHC will direct individuals to existing providers, day spaces, and shelters in the City where harm reduction supplies can be accessed along with services and pathways into treatment. BPHC will also work with other health care and service providers across the city to further decentralize delivery. BPHC outreach teams will now refer any individuals at the Mass and Cass area, and those congregating citywide, to indoor locations/service providers and day spaces for harm reduction supplies, rather than deliver materials at outdoor congregate locations. The BPHC mobile outreach team will continue to engage individuals during street outreach in hot spots of the city, as well as in response to 311 calls citywide, to connect and transport them to shelter, housing services, medical care, and treatment pathways.

11. Expand Syringe Removal and Other Clean Up

BPHC's Mobile Sharps Team operates 7 am – 7 pm seven days a week, conducting proactive sweeps of hot spots and responding to 311 calls with an average time of 45 minutes. To address the disbursement of people from the encampment, BPHC expanded the Newmarket BID Back2Work cleaning crew, which hires people in early recovery to clean the streets and pick up syringes seven days/week from 7 am – 2 pm. The City and BPHC will expand the use of employment-based clean-up crews and crew hours of operation,

particularly in the early morning, to maintain cleanliness and quality of life, seeking regular feedback from impacted neighbors on challenging spots.