

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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**We've compiled answers to some of the most common questions about Alternative First Responders. If you're curious, concerned, or just want to learn more, you're in the right place.**

## **1. What are alternative first responders?**

Alternative first responders are people outside of law enforcement (police) who respond to calls for assistance. They are often community members and/or professionals who are deeply connected to, and understand, the communities they serve. Alternative first responders are highly skilled in helping people get the right care without any need for force. They also have the skills to de-escalate and reduce harm. This includes letting people decide what they need and how they receive help. They can also link people in with a wide range of supports – both practical and therapeutic.

***Alternative First Responder Scenario:** Someone has called concerned for an individual alone in the park and in distress. Alternative first responders arrive at the site, one medic and one outreach worker known to the individual. When they approach the person, they simply say 'My name is Michelle, I'm here to check in with you, how can I support you today?'* With patience and compassion, the alternative first responders can provide the right support – a blanket, transportation to a place of care, a meal, emotional counsel – and does not rely on police or taking someone to the emergency department.

## **2. Why do we need alternative first responders?**

Right now, we have a police-first response model. There are critical gaps in how we respond to community needs – gaps made worse by chronic underinvestment in social and community sectors. We currently lack a diverse, needs-based approach to the first response. Police are not equipped culturally or structurally to deliver the right response. Even with additional training, research shows they continue to be inappropriate first responders in situations requiring de-escalation, care, or support. This mismatch leads to harmful outcomes.

### **Police practices often result in:**

- Escalating situations into crises
- Acting on confirmation bias
- Misreading behaviour or reluctance to engage as threats
- Increasing the risk of harm due to access to lethal force

### **When we use alternative first responders instead of police, we:**

- Meet people with dignity and care
- Reduce unnecessary police interactions
- Minimise the over-policing of communities
- Prevent the criminalisation of health and social needs
- Lower the risk of lethal force and serious harm
- Offer clear pathways to both immediate and long-term support

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***Police-first response scenario:** Someone has called concerned for an individual alone in the park and in distress. The call is recorded as a welfare check. As it is not considered a health emergency, the police are the only ones authorised to respond. As the police arrive on site, they immediately begin a line of questioning that feels more accusatory than compassionate. The individual feels as though they are doing something wrong – they feel scared and intimidated – which heightens their emotional state. Police increase the pressure, and the situation escalates into an arrest.*

### **3. Why don't we have alternative first responders?**

In Australia, a longstanding failure to invest in alternative models, address police malpractice, and properly fund health, social, and community services has left us with limited to no options for alternative responses to police. Yet, there is a wealth of research and demonstrated best practice, both in Australia and internationally, showing the potential and real effectiveness of alternative first responders to police. In Australia, many communities and programs have emerged in resistance to the police-first approach, driven by resilience and the urgent need to reduce harm caused by policing practices and frameworks.

These alternatives, however, are largely underfunded, remain as pilot programs, and lack proper evaluation and sustained government investment. Marginalised groups have been at the forefront of advocating for alternative first responder models, driven by the need to overcome entrenched structural and institutional barriers.

### **4. What has been happening?**

Communities are seeing the harmful consequences of a police-first response. One of the greatest strengths of our communities is their ability to adapt, be resilient and respond on a needs-basis. From this, small but impactful programs have been piloted to reduce the need for police involvement. While these programs are proving that with the right approach, support can be delivered effectively, they often remain unsupported because of restrictive short-term funding and cannot expand to their full potential.

### **5. Who supports alternative first responders?**

The need for alternative first responders is supported by research, outcomes from royal commissions, advocacy efforts, coronial inquests and a strong community desire. In addition, Alternative First Responders is endorsed by community-led organisations and individuals nation wide. You can sign our pledge to join the movement. While the concept of alternative first responders is well researched and practiced, what we urgently need now is the courage and commitment from policymakers to invest in it boldly.

### **6. Who should respond instead?**

The diversity of alternative first responders should be as diverse as our communities. This is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It is clear that we cannot continue with the status quo of police-first as this default places harm, first and, care last. **When we ask the question, who should respond, we must first listen to the answers that arise from the community. The solutions lie here.**