

## ACORNS Unit: Police and Social Workers Bridging the Gap with Homelessness and Mental Illness

Cassandra Deck-Brown served in the city of Raleigh Police Department for nearly 34 years. Prior to retiring from her post as Raleigh Police Chief, Deck-Brown formed a new unit within the police department called [ACORNS](#). This unit's name, a play off the city's nickname, the City of Oaks, is aimed specifically at providing services to the homeless and mental health consumers. The ACORNS unit, an acronym for **A**ddressing **C**risis through **O**utreach, **R**eferrals, **N**etworking, and **S**ervice, has the mission "to connect with individuals in crisis and provide them with the resources needed to meet their individual goals," in efforts of regaining an enhanced quality of life both physically and mentally. Born from an idea pre-pandemic, ACORNS soon became an absolute necessity during the pandemic. At that time, Chief Deck-Brown assembled a team of personnel to explore circumstances in the city of Raleigh involving the homeless population and mental health consumers while evaluating programs across the country that existed to address similar issues.

Wanting to be intentional about best practices; the current climate between police and the community; voices centered on defunding the police; and what specifically impacted the capital city, were priority concerns in her development considerations. Ultimately, Deck-Brown saw a greater priority as well as the ability to collaborate with the local community stakeholders, faith-based groups, nonprofits, social workers, healthcare workers, criminal justice practitioners, justice reform advocates and others who were already working to address some of those issues in the city of Raleigh. Recognizing a multi-faceted approach to addressing these crises, ACORNS would use a variety of methods to assist those in crisis including outreach, education, on-call field services, investigation, and intervention. Her vision reflected an innovative dynamic that was not unfamiliar in-part to other programs within the Raleigh Police Department. With a history of having an in-house police psychologist, and later creating a Trauma Counselor position in the department, it was more of a natural progression in her efforts to further promote wellness within the organization and throughout the community. Her vision placed trained social workers serving alongside law enforcement officers in response to crises-related calls. The ACORNS Team, comprised of a police sergeant, a detective, three social workers and three police officers would take a holistic approach in response to these types of crises. Being innovative through funding strategies, the initial team would be funded through the police department, via a reallocation of police resources. Recognizing that there were some who advocated for police reform and did not share the same sentiment for police responding to mental health-related calls, Deck-Brown deeply expressed the necessity to introduce this type of program in Raleigh with the reality that the police have traditionally had to and would continue to have some role in these types of encounters. That reality also reflected the limited social services resources available to respond to these types of crises. Her focus was on the response to the call; the recognition of the crisis afoot and the solutions that can be provided to address the circumstances-both immediate and long term. Prior to this program launching, there was considerable effort to connect with the various stakeholders, service providers and practitioners engaged in related services. While the department was creating a new unit, it was important to ensure that the department had a true partnership with the existing service providers on all levels throughout the community. That partnership would also reflect the selection team who would interview the potential candidates for hire.

The ACORNS team is non-traditional in other ways as well. Although it is a field-response unit, it is not housed in those traditional operational divisions. This unit is housed in the Administrative Services Division, which currently oversees Psychological Services, the Trauma Counselor, and the Department's Health and Wellness Unit. Deck-Brown was intentional about placing it in a collective environment focused on internal and external wellness. As one of her many legacies, now retired Chief Cassandra Deck-Brown passed the torch to the new chief and remaining staff upon her retirement on July 1, 2021. Creating the vision, and laying the foundation, she undoubtedly is excited about all that the ACORNS team will do in blazing the trail in this region and effecting real change in this innovative approach to 21<sup>st</sup> Century policing.