

# Changing Eugene's approach to fighting crime

## Plan drafted to aid police response

By Catherine Hawley  
Emerald Associate Editor

Members of Eugene's police force would like to spend less time responding to calls for help and more time patrolling streets and neighborhoods.

To this end, Eugene's Department of Public Safety has been working on a long-range plan that would fundamentally change the approach law enforcement officials take in fighting crime.

A draft version of a long-range plan for the department, which encompasses police, fire and emergency medical services, has been submitted to the city council and is now being prepared for presentation to the public this spring.

The report recommends that the department shift to a community-oriented strategy of law enforcement, spending more time and money on crime prevention and working with a variety of social agencies to eliminate community conditions that foster crime.

Although the recommendations are deliberately non-specific at this stage of planning, the draft report suggests the department explore the possibility of establishing beat patrols to operate out of decentralized precinct stations.

City council member Shawn Boles said he supports the idea of community-oriented policing.

"It's very important to move away from the quasi-militaristic approach we're taking now and reintegrate the police into the community," Boles said. "I'm looking forward to seeing the cop on the beat."

Right now, the department is operating on an "incident-driv-

en" strategy, said Tim Birr, public information officer for the department, which means police and other emergency services are dispatched only in response to calls for help.

"If you see a police car on the street during the day, it's probably on its way from one family dispute, or something, to another," Birr said.

Currently, officers do not have the time to regularly patrol neighborhoods or conduct investigations into any but the more serious crimes, Birr said.

The department has been operating this way out of necessity the last few years because the number of calls for emergency services has increased sharply, Birr said, although budget constraints have kept the size of the department fairly constant.

As a result, officer workloads have almost doubled since 1983, according to figures published in the draft report, and officers must spend most of their time responding to high-priority calls.

"The community has had no complaints about how we handle high-priority calls" such as homicides, armed robberies and rapes, Birr said. "They are not as happy with our response to what we call 'quality of life' calls."

"Quality of life" is the department's term for non-emergency requests for service, such as complaints about loud parties, public drunkenness and barking dogs.

"Our response is often less timely and limited in what we can do," Birr said. "It used to be that if you called in a burglary, we would come out and do a full-blown investigation — take fingerprints and every-

thing. These days, we would probably just take your report over the phone."

The long-range report is the first step in an attempt to address public frustrations over what they may perceive to be the department's lack of responsiveness.

A series of public forums will be held this spring and summer to present the long-range plan to Eugene's citizens and to get an idea of the level of service the community expects and is willing to pay for.

The department wants to include the public as much as possible in developing its plan for the future, Birr said.

Besides more contact with private citizens, the department would like to work more closely with school districts, the

planning department and other social agencies to alleviate chronic problems such as homelessness and drug abuse.

"Crime is an offshoot of the extent that a community takes care of its people," Birr said.

One such program has been operating successfully in Eugene since fall, Birr said. The

problems. CAHOOTS workers cooperate with Lane County Mental Health staff to provide treatment for their clients.

After the series of public forums is conducted, the report will be re-evaluated and a final version will be submitted to the city council sometime next fall.

Boles said he expects the

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— Shawn Boles

CAHOOTS van, funded by the city and operated by White Bird Clinic, responds to emergency calls involving people intoxicated by drugs or alcohol, or people with serious mental

plan to meet with approval from Eugene's citizens.

"The community has already shown a willingness to be partners in law enforcement," Boles said.



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