

There's Already an Alternative to Calling the Police

A 31 year old program in Eugene, Oregon is a model in de-escalating situations that could end with law enforcement violence.

By Anna V. Smith
High Country News

As citizens across the country fill the streets to protest police killings of Black people, the violent response from law enforcement has added urgency to a national conversation about police brutality. Pressure is mounting to reform or abolish police departments. City officials in Western urban centers like Los Angeles are reducing police budgets — L.A.'s currently totals \$1.8 billion — and reinvesting in underfunded social initiatives. Minneapolis City Council members pledged in June to disband its police department entirely. As cities look for what's next, there is already a proven system of de-escalation for the high volume of mental health calls that police respond to, which often end in violence.

Mobile, community-based crisis programs employ first responders that are not police to address disturbances where crimes are not being committed.

One of the nation's longest-running examples is CAHOOTS — Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets — in Eugene, Oregon. CAHOOTS has inspired similar programs in other cities in the region, including the Denver Alliance for Street Health Response, Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland and Portland Street Response in Oregon.

Such programs take police out of the equation when someone is going through a mental health crisis, struggling with substance abuse, or experiencing homelessness. When police show up, situations can escalate, and the use of force can be disproportionate, especially towards Black people; a 2016 study estimated that 20% to 50% of fatal encounters with law enforcement involved someone with a mental illness. Advocates say the CAHOOTS model shows those encounters aren't inevitable: Less than 1% of the calls that CAHOOTS responds to need police assistance. The CAHOOTS system relies on trauma-informed de-escalation and harm reduction, which reduces calls to



With just over 2% of the Eugene and Springfield police departments' annual budgets, CAHOOTS teams answered 17% of the department's overall call volume. This has saved the city, on average, \$8.5 million each year. Photo by Thomas Patterson

police, averts harmful arrest-release-repeat cycles, and prevents violent police encounters.

THE WHITE BIRD CLINIC IN Eugene started CAHOOTS 31 years ago as an alternative for people who felt alienated or disenfranchised from systems that had failed them, CAHOOTS Operations

Coordinator Tim Black said in an interview. "We're there to listen, we're there to empathize, and we're there to really reflect on what they're going through," and to discuss ways to access resources to help them. CAHOOTS — a free, 24/7 community service — is funded by Eugene and neighboring Springfield at a cost of around \$2 million, equal to just over 2% of their police departments' annual budgets. The program is currently fundraising to expand and make up for COVID-19-related budget cuts.

Under the model, instead of police, a medic and a mental health worker are dispatched for calls such as welfare checks or potential overdoses. In 2017, such teams answered 17% of the Eugene Police Department's overall call volume. This has saved the city, on average, \$8.5 million each year from 2014-2017, according to the White Bird Clinic.

Though CAHOOTS uses the police department's central dispatch, it is distinct from the department. Employees do not carry guns or wear uniforms; instead, they wear casual hoodies and drive vans with a dove painted on the side. CAHOOTS' methods are designed to prevent escalation, Black said. "If an officer enters that situation with power, with authority, with that uniform and a command presence, that situation is really likely to escalate."

It's a false assumption that people experiencing a mental health crisis will respond violently, Black said, and a police response is often unnecessary. CAHOOTS fielded over 24,000 calls

continued on page 7

VRFPD Promotions



The Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District held a badge pinning ceremony to celebrate a series of officer promotions within the department. Pictured, left to right with their new rank are: volunteer David Senz - Battalion Chief, Will Steinweg - Training Division Chief; Rob Davis - Op-

erations Division Chief; volunteer Loren Loomis - Battalion Chief. Not pictured is volunteer Dan Hanson - Battalion Chief. Congratulations to all these fine officers and thank you for your continued service to our community!



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