

Designated drivers

An evening on the beat of Portland's pick-up crew for over-imbibers

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It's 9 p.m. on a gray, drizzly June evening and a pair of navy blue-clad EMTs are searching the streets of Northwest Portland for the hopelessly inebriated. Paul Monagle and Ashley Nikoo, both veterans in this mission, slow down as they pass darkened alleyways and busy corners in their white van, peering through groups of Friday night revelers for the unseen, the stepped-over. Cruising down West Burnside, Nikoo's phone rings, breaking the windshield-wiper-backed tranquility of the ride. "Fifth and Oak," says Nikoo. "We've got a pick-up."

Thus begins the pair's evening shift as a shuttle van to sobriety. Nikoo and Monagle work for Central City Concern's Hooper Inebriate Emergency Response Service, or CHIERS, a system that picks up intoxicated locals and brings them in to the program's 22-year-old Sobering Station on East Burnside. Each evening, a duo of CHIERS employees roam the city — either in response to a call or on patrol — picking up an average of eight people a night. But they're not alone. The Portland Police Bureau also contributes to the Sobering Station, dropping off inebriated people without a record-marring write-up throughout the day. In total, the two teams bring in nearly 9,000 people a year.

However, these numbers could soon change. Starting July 1, CHIERS will lose its morning and early afternoon shift — which kicks off at 7 a.m. — due to city budget cuts. This is a tentative fix. The city council voted to reevaluate the new schedule in six months, thanks to some last-minute pull by Commissioner Amanda Fritz. But it could make a significant change in the way CHIERS runs. Fortunately, the Sobering Station will remain open during these hours, accepting drop offs from the police. But CHIERS' goal is to bring in the majority of the pick-ups, driving taxpayer dollars away from the police-dependant service.

"It certainly is the least harmful thing we could do," says CHIERS manager Sarah Goforth. "We have the police supporting us to stay running as often as possible and the public relies on us. Realistically, I don't know what kind of change we'll see. But we have the community's support."

One of the top sources that frequents CHIERS' response line, Portland Patrol Inc. (PPI), called in tonight's downtown pick-up. As Monagle scans Fifth Avenue from the driver's seat, Nikoo looks up from the passenger seat's police scanner monitor. "There he is," she says, pointing at a crumpled figure spooning a large,

overstuffed backpack outside of a shuttered food cart. The pair recognizes him by name, noting that he's a regular visitor. How often? They're not sure. "It's kind of like eating a hamburger," Monagle says. "You know you eat them a lot, but you don't remember how often."

Pulling over, the pair swiftly hops out of the vehicle and gently carries the older, bearded man to the back of the van before nestling his pack behind his back. He softly mumbles, tightening his long black coat around his thin body, before settling into the fetal position and quickly dozing off. It seems like an old routine. Drawing minimal attention — one of CHIERS' top goals — the van quietly continues on into the night.

While CHIERS has a small fleet of white vans, it only has one out on patrol at a time, a system the program aims to change. Monagle and Nikoo's vehicle is one of "the newer ones," fully equipped with emergency medical supplies, a jump seat behind the driver's seat for observing medical students (or curious reporters) and the police scanner computer. The second

half of the van is separated from the front by thick black bars, and holds a much simpler set-up: hard, waterproof flooring and siding and a small drain used to dispose of unwelcome fluids. That's it.

Most of the people that call in to CHIERS are business owners, hospital staff or security workers, like PPI. But occasionally, concerned passersby dial in. "We really depend on the public's help," says Monagle, as he

steers the van back to the Sobering Station. "It's similar to 'If a tree falls in a forest....' If someone is passed out drunk on the street and no one reports them, will we be able to help them? Probably not."

As the van backs into the headquarters' parking lot, Sobering Station employees rush out to help. They are prepared for anything: A belligerent, violent admittee or, like this particular pick-up, a passed-out guest. Earlier in the evening, the station admitted a loud, confused woman, struggling with the attendees, believing she was going to jail. After the staff removed her valuable items — in an effort to keep visitors safe along with their possessions — she begrudgingly stumbled into the woman's sobering room, spitting obscenities. But in this instance, Monagle simply sets the older man into a wheelchair and pushes him inside.

The Sobering Station is surprisingly peaceful. The lights are dimmed to a comforting glow and a soft snoring from recovering admittees creates an almost dreamlike atmosphere. Attendants — both EMTs and recovered addicts — speak quietly to one another, flipping through old

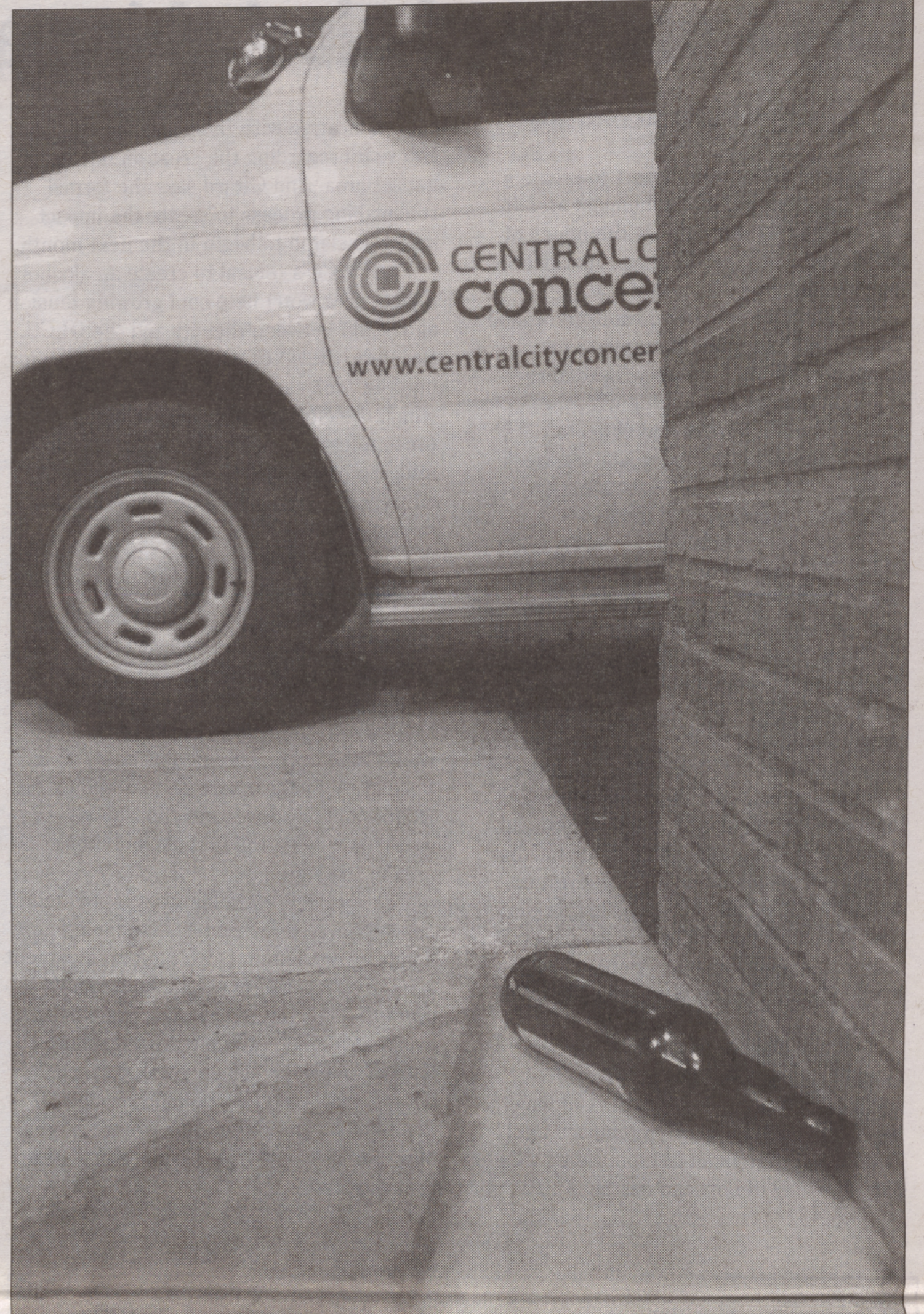


PHOTO BY KRISTINA WRIGHT

newspapers and sipping tea, seeming equally relaxed by their work environment. The small station houses three group rooms — one for women, two for men — sparsely furnished with a few tables on the cement floor. The station also has four single cells for visitors who are at risk of hurting themselves or others. Legally, the patrons can stay up to 48 hours, but usually they leave between four or eight — whenever their blood alcohol level is back to a sober state.

"Can I leave yet?" asks a tired-looking man in his 50s, peering through the bars separating his group room and the attendant's desk. "I'm cold. And I think I'm all better now."

The attendant on call sighs. "You know you've only been here a couple hours, man. I have the heater on, go on and stand by it. Don't you know it's raining out?" In response, the man starts reciting his Miranda Rights in a slurred stream, despite the attendant's interruption that "we're not the police."

"Just relax for a little bit more," the attendant urges. The man goes back to the table, resting his head on his palm.

In every interaction with an intoxicated visitor, the on-call attendants stay cool-headed and calm, despite the inevitable instability of the situation. "We may come off as cold to some, or emotionless," says Monagle. "But we see a lot of drama. We've learned it's the best way to counter that energy."

After wheeling the older man into a group room, an attendant offers him a cup of minestrone soup and crackers, a supply always on hand. The man ignores the offer and curls up in a familiar corner underneath a heater.

CHIERS doesn't just let these return patrons go unnoticed. When they start recognizing faces, staff steps in to offer assistance and recommend city-funded detox help. "I think a lot of people see this as hitting bottom," says CHIERS manager

Goforth. "They think, 'I am here sleeping in a cement room with a bunch of alcoholics and this is my life,' and they are ready to turn it around. So we're here to help."

For some, it's a lifesaver. For others, it's a quick fix. "We see success stories, but we also see cycles of recovered alcoholics coming back," says Amanda Guevara, the station's night manager. "It's tough."

Monagle and Nikoo head back to the van to watch the scanner for calls. It's a slow night. Both medical students, the pair have a hard time explaining why they spend their time at CHIERS as opposed to an emergency room or other EMT service. "There's a point in EMT work where all of your calls involve alcohol. I thought, why not focus on the main source? These are people who need real help, not just a drunk frat boy on a Saturday night," says Monagle.

Nikoo sips a Starbucks coffee while staring at the scanner, eyes unmoving. Calls come in for burglaries, fires. No dice. Nikoo usually works nights, but knows the summer cutbacks could impact her work. "Cutting the morning shift will definitely be an experiment," she says. "It probably won't make much of a difference, since we pick up so many more people at night, but who knows."

Inside, an attendant yawns, filling out paperwork for the recent intake. In the far back room, a soft plop followed by a moan breaks the calm ambience. Without a second thought, the attendant pulls a mop and bucket from a storage closet and heads to the back room, yelling out "You OK buddy?" as she opens the door. Once irritated by being stuck in the holding room, the man is now humbled with embarrassment and gratitude as these calm strangers care for his well-being, rather than arcing around his hunched figure on the sidewalk. "Water, please," he gasps. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. Thank you. So much."