

## Time to prioritize a more robust response to street crises

In our interview with Portland Police Chief Danielle Outlaw, a recurring theme emerged. We need new responders on the front lines to attend to the calls for assistance that don't need a police officer. Not every call has a criminal nexus, and in fact, many require a skillset and a presence that specifically does not involve a badge and a gun.

We don't have to look far for a great example.

In the Eugene-Springfield metro area, residents have CAHOOTS, which stands for Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets. As its name

suggests, CAHOOTS is a 24-hour mobile crisis intervention resource dispatched through the region's emergency response centers. It's a free service to callers in both cities, funded entirely through the Eugene Police Department.

When a caller needs assistance – but not law enforcement – a team composed of a medic and a crisis worker respond, providing care and assessments for people in medical or psychological crisis, as well as information, referral and advocacy. In some cases they are able to transport the individual to a service provider.

This is putting the right resource to the task. This is smart.

Chief Outlaw spoke about a pilot project to direct calls that don't require police intervention to appropriate responders. An officer at the 911 dispatch center helps decide if a call for service requires a police officer or another service to respond. This is a good first step, and one we expect will help illustrate just how much another unit of responders, one trained for mental health and addiction issues on the streets, is needed.

Indeed, the police have created a Behavioral Health Unit, partnering with licensed mental health experts, as part of its settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice of the use of force on people with mental illness. But it simply cannot keep up with the need, and the mere presence of an officer in uniform, badge and gun can escalate a crisis situation.

The city is moving forward with creating public safety support specialists, or PS3s. They would be unarmed officers that respond to low-level calls, such as serving

as assistants to police activity, waiting on tow trucks and directing traffic.

These "officers" may come to serve a valuable role for the bureau, but the concept leapfrogs over the greater need: attending to serious physical and mental health crises on our streets, aggravated by homelessness. That shouldn't be a branch of the police force. That needs to be a separate channel of focus, to serve the public, not the police.

There are other local models to draw from, but none of them a comprehensive program for the county.

Central City Concern, the city's largest social service and housing provider, operates CHIERS, a van service, staffed by medical professionals trained to work with people who are intoxicated or incapacitated by drugs or alcohol. This is a great model, but it's focus does not cover the full scope of mental health issues, from despair and suicidal behavior to outright psychosis, that require assistance on the streets.

Even closer to the model is Portland Fire & Rescue's Community Health Assessment Team, or CHAT, a fledgling program that combines medical intervention with social service work. This is a great program to build upon.

Another great example is Project Respond, a 24-hour, mobile mental health crisis response service, but it's not enough. None of these individual programs are robust enough to deliver reliable, immediate responses to the level of need on the street.

Of course, the other side of this coin is there have to be places for people to go after triage. No amount of outreach on the streets can totally take up the slack for the lack of brick and mortar facilities – beds, addiction services and mental health treatment options. But in addition to creating destinations, we must have a 24-hour, fast-responding service unit like CAHOOTS to address where people are, right now.

The city – politicians and citizens alike – need to be thinking beyond the uniform on these issues, because citations, fines, jail time and warrants are only setting people back further, and incarceration is torture for people in the throes of mental illness.

As the city and the county prepare for the upcoming budget process, creating a first-responder program, fully resourced, that is actually responsive to our streets, has to be a top priority.

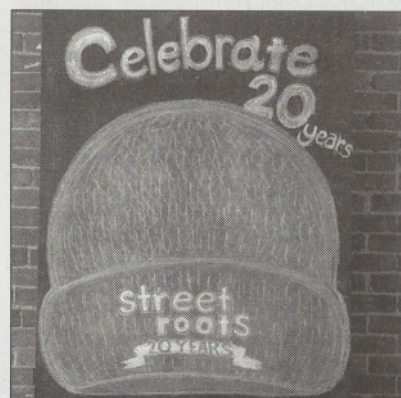
## EDITORIAL

## Support Street Roots and celebrate with a beanie!

In 2019, Street Roots turns 20. Twenty years of our newspaper committed to covering overlooked stories. Twenty years of our community giving a hand up to people struggling with homelessness and poverty. Twenty years of connecting people across this city, housed and unhoused.

Over those years, we've expanded from a monthly to a biweekly to a weekly, widening our reporting to economic, social and environmental justice. You can count on more significant investigative reporting from us. You can count on our commitment to our vendor program, as we continue to expand ways to support our vendors who earn an income selling Street Roots, buying each issue for a quarter to sell for a dollar. And you can count on our continued advocacy as we fight for the poorest residents of our region.

Over the next year, we will look back over this history of Street Roots to better understand our present, striving for a more



Artwork by Jay Juno, Street Roots vendor.

just city. Watch for our 20th anniversary celebration this summer bringing together our vendors and the Street Roots community.

To mark this 20th anniversary milestone in Street Roots style, we've designed a

commemorative beanie that all our Street Roots vendors will receive. Because individual donations are collectively the single largest way we keep Street Roots going as a nonprofit enterprise, we are offering the commemorative beanie as an incentive for giving donations of \$75 or more.

If you'd like to receive it in time for Christmas, make your donation by midnight on Dec. 10. Want us to send the beanie as a present to someone else? Email their name and address information to [beanie@streetroots.org](mailto:beanie@streetroots.org) before midnight on Dec. 10, and we'll send it out for you.

Thank you for your support of Street Roots. It takes all of us to insist that all of our lives are connected in this region, and that the fates of our poorest neighbors matter to the fates of all of our lives. Keep Street Roots a strong force in creating a constructive and compassionate path forward.

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If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-967-3982, [joanne@streetroots.org](mailto:joanne@streetroots.org). We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.

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