

JOSE ALVAREZ AND  
NILES STUART-POPE  
ATTENDING TO A  
CAHOOTS CLIENT  
IN THE VAN



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

# AID ON THE ASPHALT

**HITTING THE STREET WITH CAHOOTS** BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

**S**chizophrenics waking up in parking lots bloody and disoriented, suicidal college women threatening to jump, junkies in bathroom stalls, half-dead, face-down — this is a side of Eugene witnessed by people who choose to look after the city in ways most don't or won't. Men and women working in the shadow of their better-known cohorts, Eugene's fire and police departments, CAHOOTS fills a niche somewhere between counseling and emergency medical care — it helps people.

The need is there every day, and so is CAHOOTS.

CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) is a rare and life-saving service that functions as an arm of Eugene's White Bird Clinic. A mobile crisis intervention team linked to the city of Eugene's public safety system, CAHOOTS operates seven days a week from 11 am to 3 am, responding to non-criminal crises such as intoxication, substance abuse, mental illness, street disputes and the like. The service is free to its clients and paid for by the city.

CAHOOTS administrative representative David Zeiss of White Bird Clinic says funding for the teams "breaks down to \$520,000 for this upcoming fiscal year," with money coming directly from the Eugene Police Department (EPD) budget — the vans and the gas are paid for by the city. Zeiss says the \$520,000 is an adequate amount of money for CAHOOTS, and that it recently acquired a new van as well as a few more workers.

The approximately 15 working members of CAHOOTS are trained in crisis intervention and/or are EMT certified (a great many of the staff hold both accreditations, and more). They are paired together in one of two vans that roam everywhere within the city limits. CAHOOTS is sent out by non-emergency dispatchers, who work side-by-side with 911 dispatchers.

I was granted the privilege of riding along with two teams of these professionals who (in my opinion) deserve

to be knighted or sainted or whatever it is we do to legit heroes. Nonchalant in their super-heroism, they sip coffee and crack jokes like they're cruising to the grocery store — that is, until a call comes in.

## SCANNER-HEADS & THE DAILY GRIND

The radio crackles to life with the voice of a dispatcher, and CAHOOTS worker Niles Stuart-Pope seizes the handset with an urgency that betrays her previous calm. A homeless man with a nasty knee injury requires assistance. The team is dispatched to medically assess and then, if need be, ferry him to Sacred Heart Medical Center.

CAHOOTS aid worker Jose Alvarez, an 18-year veteran of the White Bird Clinic social services, turns around in his seat and hands me a pair of purple latex gloves. "Put these on man. Blood and poop and puke are a routine part of this job," he says. I wait for a smile that never comes. He isn't kidding. There is little chance that I myself will come in direct contact with such fluids, but the team has learned to be prepared for anything, and they want me to be safe. I feel safe — sort of.

The CAHOOTS duo homes in on the injured man's location and we arrive on the scene within minutes of the call. His leg is grossly misshapen and he accepts the examination and the ride with gratitude. This is a very mild CAHOOTS run, nothing like some of the grisly calls the teams get, which can involve anything from suicide intervention to child abuse to dead bodies. One two-person CAHOOTS team can receive upwards of 17 calls per shift.

Most striking about the CAHOOTS workers is the candor with which they address their "clients." They know those they help by first name. They can identify the shopping carts of the city's homeless on sight — *Oh, is that Susan's cart? No, that's Laurie's; see the blue tarp and how organized it is?*

Many of the people CAHOOTS assists are unable to advocate for themselves, due to mental illness and/or

severe intoxication. Clients may forget that they've been helped by the same CAHOOTS workers before, but the aid workers haven't forgotten — they know the stories and histories behind the faces they encounter.

If you took away the uniforms, the latex gloves and the big-ass white van full of medical equipment, you might mistake these initial interactions as those of concerned friends looking after their buddies, who may have forgotten the last time their friends came around to help out. Such memory lapses can lead to altercations.

"Sometimes, we go on a call and get out to help someone, but their friends may think we are there to take that person someplace unpleasant," Alvarez says, recalling times he was surrounded by less than friendly friends of a client he'd come to help. "Luckily we have enough street cred to make up for that type of thing."

Alvarez goes on to tell me that on many such occasions, former CAHOOTS clients have intervened on his behalf and neutralized almost-hostile situations. "We must be doing something right," he adds.

## CODE 3 & OTHER URGENCIES

Not all CAHOOTS encounters go smoothly. Given the often marginal or unstable state of their clientele, situations can get pretty sketch. When violence becomes a legitimate threat to the safety of a CAHOOTS team, they call in for police coverage with "Code 3," meaning the need is immediate.

CAHOOTS works closely with EPD, facilitating crisis-intervention training for the department and often taking on calls the police are not professionally qualified to handle. "Cops didn't sign up to be counselors," says Alvarez. A mutual respect exists between the two agencies. This bond appears to be honored most when CAHOOTS calls for police assistance with the added Code 3 request of expediency. Stuart-Pope recalls the last time she went out on a call that turned hostile. The team radioed in with