

Cahoots from A7

regarding crisis de-escalation and intervention,” said SLMH Executive Director Damien Sands. “We very much see them as a sister agency, and in the last few years have had discussions around how a CAHOOTS-like program might work for us.”

The nonprofit has so far found good chemistry with CGPD when aid is needed to address mental health care and support situations.

“We really value our relationship with CGPD, and I have witnessed the amazing work of [Shepherd’s] staff first hand when it comes to crisis calls,” said Sands. “When both SLMH and CGPD are on site at a call, I have seen clear communication and each group allowing the other to fill their respective duties.”

“That said, both groups are overstretched and we are limited by our hours and funding in how we can offer more support.”

Both Sands and Shepherd see funding as a significant hurdle to implementing a more effective program.

“We could build a CAHOOTS ‘lite’ model in partnership with CGPD, White Bird and possibly Lane County [Health and Human Services], where there are some funds for rural crisis,” suggested Sands, “but ultimately this would be for the city to put forward as a priority.”

Shepherd agrees a model along these lines would be a great benefit to the police department, “But it would cost money,” he lamented. “I do see a potential where some partnerships could be developed where a smaller version or offshoot of [CAHOOTS] could work.”

Brubaker expressed optimism about the partnership.

“South Lane Mental Health has been a big partner of ours for decades and they are very capable of working that out with public safety about how they could integrate in and become a good response,” he said.

Brubaker noted that rural communities tend to see challenges with the geographic spread across a large area and how far a team could reach into the country-

side. As team responses increase in mileage, law enforcement backup response times and the number of calls taken in a day start to diminish.

“CAHOOTS started off with a very truncated schedule of a few days a week for what they considered to be high-density call times,” said Brubaker, who recommended small towns target these times to have an intervention team and vehicle available in a pilot program.

Expansion of the program could follow the pilot’s success.

Brubaker also noted a common hurdle to launching such a program is getting communities to make the initial investment.

“It’s hard to convince people of money they’re going to not spend,” he said.

Identifying spending around areas where law enforcement is dealing with non-criminal activity is a good start, he said, as well as noting the high-frequency utilizers of emergency departments.

In addition to the cost savings, Brubaker feels the model simply makes ethical sense.

“Ultimately, we really do believe that client-centered, humanistic, trauma-informed kind of care response model is better for the individual being served,” he said. “It’s the right people going to the right calls.”

Community Outreach

While CGPD explores the possibility of a new crisis intervention response model, it is also working on outreach to certain demographics of Cottage Grove’s minority communities.

Since the killing of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis, Minn., by police officer Derek Chauvin, the national outcry against police violence has been marked by concerns and anger over racial

discrimination.

With the CGPD, Shepherd does not see race as playing into the department’s decision-making process.

“We don’t look at someone for the color of their skin,” he said. “We look at their behavior.”

The department’s policy manual includes a passage specifically targeting discrimination, oppression and favoritism:

“Discriminating against, oppressing or providing favoritism to any person because of age, race, color, creed, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, national origin, ancestry, marital status, physical or mental disability, medical condition or other classification protected by law, or intentionally denying or impeding another in the exercise or enjoyment of any right, privilege, power or immunity, knowing the conduct is unlawful,” it states.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports Cottage Grove’s Black or African Americans as making up 1.3 percent of the city’s population while Hispanic or Latino residents represent 10.8 percent, making the latter demographic a key part of the police department’s outreach efforts.

With two Spanish speakers on the force, the department has tried to use those skills to its advantage.

“It has allowed us to interact and be more effective in our communication, both during investigations and also just casual contacts,” said Shepherd.

Cottage Grove is also home to a significant Guatemalan population which speaks Mam, a Mayan language which is distinct from Spanish and often requires a special interpreter to communicate with the English-speaking world.

“We’ve been in con-

tact occasionally with the spiritual leaders of those groups — the priests or pastors of some of the areas where they congregate,” said Shepherd.

Though population numbers are hard to come by, Shepherd estimated there to be about 250 Mam speakers in the community as of a few years ago, though that number is likely to have grown.

The department has tried to maintain an open dialogue by reaching out to the few community members who have access to the population.

“We’ve made our services and willingness to meet with those groups readily known,” said Shepherd, referring to the general Spanish-speaking populace as well. “But we’re being sensitive to their reluctance to interact with law enforcement.”

CGPD had also been looking into prepping first graders and kindergartners with simple emergency skills using Spanish speakers before the coronavirus outbreak closed down schools.

Shepherd acknowledges that, despite some progress, there is still a trust issue to overcome.

“It’s a little bit of a dance,” he said. “We’re at the point where we will try to do anything for anybody in that community to do more outreach, but we don’t want to push ourselves on them because we don’t want to be too direct or overbearing.”

In establishing that trust, Shepherd hopes to communicate the department’s commitment to equal and fair treatment for all residents.

“The simple message is, if you don’t commit a crime, there’s nothing else we want to do with you other than serve you,” he said.

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Published weekly in the Cottage Grove Sentinel and online at cgsentinel.com

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Contact: Meg Fringer
541-942-3325 x1200
mfringer@cgsentinel.com

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