

Police cuts give Portland alternative first responder program a boost -- but can it respond to the moment?

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Springfield Police Sgt. Mike Massey shares information with Cahoots Social Worker Amy May during a tour of camping areas in Glenwood. (Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard)
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By [Molly Harbarger | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Seemingly overnight, calls to find alternatives to police have moved from the fringes of the progressive movement into the U.S. mainstream.

As elected officials in communities around the country feel pressure to shrink police budgets, they are suddenly looking to a more than 30-year-old crisis assistance program in Portland's backyard. [At the southern end of the Willamette Valley, pairs of medics and crisis workers patrol the streets of Eugene and surrounding towns and respond to 911 calls to take care of situations that don't require someone with a badge and gun – typically involving homeless people, mental health crises or drug use.](#)

In many ways, the program is one of the nation's only examples of how police abolition works in practice. It was launched with money originally earmarked for hiring more police officers and

has grown steadily since then. By most metrics, it succeeds at its primary mission: reduce the interactions between police and people who could end up in jail or harmed by those encounters.

Though it originally defunded police to some degree, however, the Eugene-area program was neither conceived nor retooled to reduce police violence toward Black and brown people. It was designed largely by white hippies to decrease policing and increase humanity in their overwhelmingly white community.

Some say that as Portland shifts money from its police bureau to begin a pilot version of the Eugene-area program, called Portland Street Response, leaders should be wary of expecting it to better serve Black Portlanders unless that community gets a central voice in its creation.

'INTERSECTING CRISES'

Portland Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty made Portland Street Response one of her priorities when she took office in 2018, long before "Black Lives Matter!" became a nightly rallying call.

She and the mayor's office convened a group of more than 50 agencies, advocates and homeless service providers to decide on how to adapt Eugene's Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets program, normally short-handed to Cahoots, to Portland's needs.

The momentum grew from news reports that showed that 52% of all arrests in the city were of homeless people and the majority of 911 calls were for homelessness-related issues. Homelessness serving nonprofit Street Roots, which works closely with Hardesty's office, raised a call for an alternative response other than police.

A small pilot version of Portland Street Response -- one member of the Fire Bureau paired with a certified mental health worker -- was supposed to launch this spring but was delayed because of the pandemic.

Hardesty's office said this week that the mental health worker is expected to be hired this month, then the first team can launch.

The pair would be dispatched through the city's 911 system for calls of "unwanted persons" and welfare checks.

As the team waited to launch, Portland's streets were taken over by tens of thousands of people protesting police violence toward Black people in the wake of the killing of George Floyd.

With their support, Hardesty was able to coalesce enough buy-in to eliminate three specialty teams from the police budget and a promise to use the money for investments for the Black community.

She pushed her fellow council members to [agree to use \\$4.8 million from eliminating the Gun Violence Reduction Team -- formerly the gang enforcement team -- to expand the Portland Street Response pilot to six teams to serve multiple parts of the city.](#)

Her office said that is expected to reduce interactions between police and homeless people, and because Black and Native American people are disproportionately affected by homelessness, it's a way to help the Black community.

Black people make up about 16% of Multnomah County's homeless population while just over 7% of residents identify as Black.

Overall, about 30% of the county's total population are people of color yet nearly 40% of homeless people in 2019 were.

"This moment demands we rethink what community safety looks like, and what a world with police alternatives looks like," Hardesty said. "Portland Street Response is a much-needed answer to several intersecting crises: systemic racism, housing crisis and police violence."

She said that the ability to move the funds from a police response to a non-police response is a "testament to the movement."

IS PORTLAND STREET RESPONSE THE ANSWER TO THE MOMENT?

There are some who worry that simply pointing to the intersection is not enough to address it.

Michael Hames-García, a professor at the University of Oregon who studies inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality and disability in the criminal justice system, said that there have been attempts to shift responsibilities from police to other agencies before.

"And those have also had destructive impacts on Black and brown communities," they said.

Hames-García pointed to welfare agencies and child protective services as agencies that have treated families in poverty or in the midst of mental health or addiction issues differently based on race.

There's no doubt cities should look to remove police from situations that do not warrant an armed and uniformed officer from showing, they said, but the replacement for police need to be chosen with input from the Black community and steeped in ideas around how governmental and criminal justice systems can be racist.

They have watched Cahoots in Eugene for years and know that it is effective because the White Bird Clinic, the nonprofit that runs it, is well-regarded in the community. Its dental and medical clinics are also gathering places for Eugene's homeless population. The nonprofit operated for 20 years before Cahoots vans first hit the road.

That presence and respect from the people the program primarily serves makes it effective, Hames-García said.

Nevertheless, they think that if Cahoots wants to better serve people of color, it still has a problem -- its ties to the police.

The vans are dispatched by the same system that triages response for Eugene police and fire crews. The program's funding is also embedded in the police budget.

Hames-García worries that as long as issues like mental illness and drug use are law enforcement responsibilities, police can use wide discretion over who should show up on those calls -- a decision that has historically disadvantaged the Black community.

MODEL PROGRAM RETHINKS RACIAL EQUITY

Tim Black, who heads Cahoots, agrees to some extent.

The city will try to create a separate phone line for Cahoots so that people who call for that service won't be answered by a greeting from the Eugene Police Department. Black said program officials have recognized that can be scary, especially for people in communities who are already unlikely to call the police for help, fearing that they might die because of it.

"We realize now that just having a phone number that is answered Eugene police is going to make our program inaccessible to some people and some communities," Black said.

The staff also started trainings to identify their own biases and learn more effective approaches to people of color.

Chelsea Swift, a medic and crisis worker with the program, said that work started before the police killing of George Floyd and before the coronavirus pandemic pushed police to rely more heavily on Cahoots because of a mandate to take as few people to jails and hospitals as possible.

The reckoning came when a Latino teenager was beaten by Springfield police, Swift said. The person who called 911 to report a person possibly being violent requested that Cahoots, not police, make the check. The call started conversations about Cahoots' founding and who the organization serves well.

The program grew from Oregon Country Fair culture and an attempt by Eugene counterculture to get care for people having bad trips without law enforcement involvement. Three decades later, the staff remains primarily white, a reflection of Eugene's demographics. The city is 83% white.

"We have this great culture at our agency, but it very much reflects who has worked there," Swift said.

Cahoots fields about 20% of calls to 911 and the non-emergency line. Only about 10% of Cahoots responses require help from the police or other public safety agencies.

In 2018, of the 22,000 calls that Cahoots responded to, less than 150 led to Cahoots requesting police for backup.

Program leaders estimate it saves \$7 million annually in medical costs because the so many of the people they help would otherwise end up in emergency rooms.

Swift said part of what accounts for the program's success is its connection to police.

A drug harm reduction worker by training, she has long been a believer in reducing the impact of police and was reluctant to accept a connection to police when she took the job with Cahoots.

But she has found that carrying a radio and sharing a dispatcher helps legitimize the program and garner buy-in from the community and from police and city leaders who control funding. It also means she has the ability to intervene with someone who would otherwise be arrested, cited or injured by police.

"Cahoots is good for our community and there are ways we can make ourselves even better for our community. Right now, it's pretty imperative we remain within the 911 system because that does allow us to have access to create different outcomes," Swift said. "That doesn't mean there can't be systems that are not looped into a dispatch system that can be as effective as how our model stands."

She hopes that this moment when police abolition is suddenly on so many people's tongues can be an opportunity to keep thinking about who else can respond to the community's needs and how.

Not every call needs someone attached to police, Swift said. Some people just need a wound cared for, not a trained medic. Some families need a person trained specifically in domestic violence and family mediation that Cahoots crisis workers find themselves navigating on the fly.

Adding in more and varied people to respond to calls for help would free up Cahoots workers to focus on the calls they do best, and enable police to do the same, she said. Both Swift and Black also want cities that are considering replicating their program to invest in the rest of their social service systems as well.

Often, Cahoots workers must tell people who need shelter or behavioral health treatment that there is nowhere to take them. Police have even fewer resources when Cahoots vans are unavailable.

"I listen to cops run around all night responding to issues with housing, health care, food, education that could likely be prevented," Swift said.

RACIAL FOCUS STILL UNKNOWN

The city of Portland does not yet have a timeline for when the five additional Portland Street Response crews will be dispatched, nor whether they will consist of an emergency medical technician and a mental health counselor, like the inaugural team.

Hardesty plans to reconvene the large group that helped conceive Portland Street Response to figure out those questions. Onlookers like Hames-García hope that Black community groups and Black people who have been homeless will be featured prominently at the table.

Alan Ferschweiler, head of the Portland firefighters union, said he is pushing to have a firefighter on each of those teams -- at least initially. Firefighters are trained as medics, know the 911 system, how to use radios and have relationships with hospitals, so he sees it as a way to ensure the pilot is successful.

The news that Portland Street Response's pilot would expand so quickly came as a surprise to him. He found out about it from news articles.

Not only is he wary of ramping up an untested program so quickly, he is reluctant to do so in the midst of a conversation about moving police responsibilities to other agencies.

As firefighters and medics, "we're not interested in doing police work, we have no desire to do police work, we have no desire to be in confrontational situations with people," Ferschweiler said.

They also do not do racial justice work. Ferschweiler said he has never received training on bias or how to respond with care to people whose racial identities differ from his: white.

"It's those types of things I would really be excited about being able to learn more about," Ferschweiler said. "I think those are nuanced things that would be really great to have that type of training provided."

A spokesperson for Hardesty's office said that there is no such training planned yet for Portland Street Response workers. Hardesty has said that there need to be more first responders from backgrounds that match the community they are serving. Her office did not fully address questions about whether Portland Street Response will explicitly require that as part of its hiring process and training process.

But when the City Council approved the police bureau cuts last month, Hardesty vowed that she would work toward a community safety plan so "you don't have to worry about who shows up when you call 911."

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