

Allentown Police Department: involving social workers a good idea, disagreements about funding

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing January 15, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder*


So much going on at the national level. Hard for Gadfly to think about local matters these days.

But here he continues to keep an eye on what's happening in our neighborhood regarding reimagining the way public safety is done in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

Gadfly has been worried that we will soon be in a "George who?" state if we don't keep our eye on the ball.

Allentown is a little bit ahead of us in terms of movement on concrete proposals, but our police department has made moves toward partnering with the Health Bureau, and we're looking forward to a Public Safety Committee meeting soon.

We've entered the election campaign season, and Gadfly wonders if reimagining public safety will be an issue.

He hopes so, while there is still some GeorgeFloyd momentum.

See [here](#) and [here](#) for Gadfly's review of the Eugene, Oregon, CAHOOTS program cited in this article.

selections from Andrew Wagaman, “Who should respond to 911 calls related to mental illness? Allentown discusses police alternatives, though path forward remains hazy.” Morning Call, January 14, 2021.

Allentown officials are largely in agreement: Recruiting social workers to help city police respond to 911 calls involving mental health crises, substance abuse and homelessness issues is, conceptually, a wise move.

But some are reluctant to bring in a consultant until they are sure Lehigh County officials and one of the regional health networks are on board — and prepared to provide funding. Others fear mental health professionals will expropriate, rather than supplement, police resources.

Allentown City Council set aside \$100,000 in its budget this year for general consulting services. Legislators Ce-Ce Gerlach and Joshua Siegel want to spend a share to figure out how to adapt programs used in other cities where mental health workers assist or replace police officers in certain “community interventions.”

The best-known policing alternative is the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets model, developed by the White Bird Clinic in the late 1980s in Eugene, Oregon. Two-person teams consisting of a medic and a mental health crisis worker serve as the first responders to nearly a fifth of all emergency calls. Their uniform is a hoodie, and they do not carry weapons. The goal: connect people in crisis with services such as housing programs, youth counseling and drug rehabilitation rather than incarcerating them.

Dispatchers are trained to recognize which calls can be routed to the CAHOOTS teams. In 2019, police backup was requested just 150 times

out of roughly 24,000 CAHOOTS calls, according to the White Bird Clinic.

Larger cities such as Denver, Houston and most recently Chicago have begun pairing police officers with mental health workers trained in harm reduction and deescalation. Each program is a little different, but generally, the social workers conduct welfare checks, respond to suicide threats and handle calls involving people with mental illness or substance abuse.

Locally, Bucks County last month announced a two-year, \$400,000 pilot program that will pair social workers with police officers during mental health-related incidents in Bensalem Township, the township with the county's largest police department. It's based on a similar program in Dauphin County.

Supporters say such programs reduce the chances of violence between police and citizens, and save local governments money. More than a fifth of fatal encounters with police involved people with mental illness, according to one study in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine. And law enforcement agencies spend roughly \$1 billion a year transporting people with severe mental illness, according to a 2017 Treatment Advocacy Center survey.

Allentown police Chief Glenn Granitz Jr. said pursuing a pilot program like those in Dauphin and Bucks counties is a "no-brainer." But it shouldn't come out of the police budget, he said, arguing that the city already comes up short in measurements of officers per capita.

"We would be served well by adding [both] police officers and social workers to improve the safety and quality of life in Allentown," he said after Wednesday's meeting.

Mayor Ray O’Connell said city and county officials are meeting next week with interested community partners like Thomases and officials with St. Luke’s University Health Network to figure out how best to proceed. Before council calls in a consultant, officials need to pin down the questions it wants answered, O’Connell said.

“Go slow to go fast,” O’Connell advised council.

It’s important for Allentown to signal its commitment to other important stakeholders involved, Gerlach countered, in order to prevent inertia.

“I would urge us to be the one to lead this, and demonstrate some buy-in,” she said.

Over the past year, calls by Siegel and Gerlach to reallocate some of the police department’s budget to various social services have vexed Councilmen Daryl Hendricks and Ed Zucal — both retired city police officers — and Councilwoman Candida Affa. On Wednesday, Affa praised the merits of a CAHOOTS-style program but feared it could come at the expense of the police department.

“When you start taking money from the police budget to fund these programs, the citizens of Allentown won’t stand for that,” she said.

While the Eugene Police Department does fund the CAHOOTS program, it ends up saving millions annually because of its reduced call volume, Siegel said.

“We should be less wary of a reimagination or reallocation of public safety, because the need is still being met. We’re just shifting who’s meeting the need,” Siegel argued. “The community is being kept safe, the individuals in need of services are being addressed. But now, rather than

being met with punishment, they are being invested in through mental health services.”

Locally, officials have been taking incremental steps reevaluating how it handles behavioral health calls.

For example, Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin last month announced that the office’s Regional Intelligence and Investigation Center will work with local mental health experts to ensure crisis intervention training provided to the Allentown Police Department is as effective as possible. It will also work with the Allentown Health Bureau on data-driven efforts to prevent opioid overdose deaths.

The Lehigh County public defender’s office hired a social worker in early 2020 to assist clients with a variety of issues, and plans to hire another this year.

In Allentown, about 40% of police officers have undergone crisis intervention training led by mental health providers and family advocates, and Granitz said during an October budget presentation he’s committed to having the entire force complete the training in 2021. His department is also teaming with Cedar Crest College to measure whether its training and community partnerships are curbing repeat behavioral health emergencies and police use-of-force incidents.

In a separate initiative with Cedar Crest College, Allentown will begin a three-year process in 2021 of establishing a community police program. Part of the process will be researching community policing programs in other cities.