

“CAHOOTS” program in Eugene, Oregon, sends medic and crisis worker on non-emergency calls

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police August 7, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

Are you with the Gadfly?

As we approach our August 11 Public Safety Committee meeting with the Police Department, we are trying to wrap our arms around what “defund the police” means by looking at how some cities have revisioned public safety.

For 30 years a program called **CAHOOTS (CRISIS ASSISTANCE HELPING OUT ON THE STREETS)** has operated in Eugene, Oregon. CAHOOTS works through public safety dispatch, sending a 2-person team of a medic and a crisis worker on non-emergency calls. CAHOOTS responds to about 20% of calls to the Eugene Police Department and takes up little more than 1% of the budget. CAHOOTS estimated last fall its response saved \$6 million in medical services costs alone.

Gadfly will cherry-pick some clips from the reading around he’s been doing on CAHOOTS and will probably spend another post on it to encourage you to take a deeper dive.

The value of CAHOOTS:

“Programs such as CAHOOTS . . . reduce the likelihood that citizens in distress will fall into deeper holes at the hands of persons not trained to deal with their problems, or bear the additional burden of having their distress criminalized.”

- Mental health workers, rather than police, respond to non-criminal emergency 911 calls.

- The CAHOOTS programme reduces confrontations involving police officers, saves money, and allows police to concentrate on law enforcement.
- The programme could be an alternative model for policing in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests and calls to defund the police.

The problem, addressing the problem:

“For many Americans experiencing a mental health crisis, the first professional they encounter will be a police officer. It isn’t an ideal combination. Often, someone acting irrationally, erratically or aggressively is confronted by an armed officer trained in the use of force if they feel the public – or themselves – are in danger.

Tragically, the results can be fatal. An analysis of police shootings reported by the Washington Post in 2015/16 suggests a quarter of those killed displayed signs of mental illness. In countless more cases, someone in need of medical or psychological care ends up in a cell, rather than getting the treatment they need. With mental illness affecting as many as a quarter of young Americans, the need for an alternative solution is clear.

The city of Eugene, Oregon, takes a different approach. For 30 years, the **CAHOOTS** (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) programme has been sending teams of unarmed civilians to deal with 911 calls that elsewhere are dealt with by police.

Each team consists of a mental health crisis worker and an EMT (emergency medical technician, or paramedic). Between them, they have the skills and training to deal with mental health issues, homelessness, intoxication, substance abuse, disorientation and dispute resolution.”

Services provided:

CAHOOTS provides immediate stabilization in case of urgent medical need or psychological crisis, assessment, information, referral, advocacy & (in some cases) transportation to the next step in treatment.

CAHOOTS offers a broad range of services, including but not limited to:

- Crisis Counseling
- Suicide Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention
- Conflict Resolution and Mediation
- Grief and loss
- Substance Abuse
- Housing Crisis
- First Aid and Non-Emergency Medical Care
- Resource Connection and Referrals
- Transportation to Services

What CAHOOTS isn't:

“CAHOOTS workers are not trained in law enforcement and do not have the same authority as police. We are a mobile crisis intervention team, designed as an alternative to police response for non-violent crises.”

“CAHOOTS is not, and never could be, a replacement for police altogether.”

“Partnership with police has always been essential to our model . . . A CAHOOTS-like program without a close relationship with police would be very different from anything we've done.”

“I don't have a coherent vision of a society that has no police force.”

Gadfly wishes the people on the Next Door blog he reported on a week or so ago, people who had a knee-jerk negative response to “defund the police,” would consider a program like CAHOOTS. It's widely referred to now as a model program. Let's do another post on it, ok?

