

The re-imagining of public safety going on around us

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [George Floyd killing](#) April 12, 2021

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

Gadfly's back on his "re-imagining" soapbox.

Is it any wonder as we watch the news of two troubling police events this morning?

Granted the Minnesota event details are not known yet, but it doesn't look good.

Note what Allentown is doing. Working to build a co-responder system. Gadfly has done several posts on the **CAHOOTS** and similar programs. Click [here](#) and [here](#), for example.

Councilman Colon has recommended we look at the Upper Macungie **HUB** program.

Gadfly knows there is a pilot project with the Health Bureau, and we've just seen evidence that some officers are getting crisis training.

But it doesn't seem like much going on.

At least one of our Council candidates has ideas in the re-imagining direction.

selections from *Peter Hall and Sarah M. Wojcik, "Following two fatal police shootings in Lehigh Valley region, officials weigh crisis programs to avert tragedy." Morning Call, April 11, 2021.*

When **Catasauqua police** responded to a domestic disturbance at the Shirey home in February, it was the eighth time in six years law enforcement had been called to the address.

On four prior visits, officers were called to help emergency medical services when Ryan Shirey suffered seizures. On another, it was to assist EMS when Shirey's arm became trapped in a recliner during what his father described as a mental health episode. Police also were called when the family dog twice escaped.

When three officers arrived Feb. 19, the situation quickly turned tragic, as Shirey barricaded himself inside the house and retreated to a basement bedroom. As the police entered the bedroom, Shirey charged with a revolver and one of the officers opened fire, fatally wounding him.

The circumstances of Shirey's death are similar to scenarios that play out across the country with distressing regularity. People suffering mental health crises, sometimes threatening suicide with a deadly weapon, end up in a standoff with police. Officers, fearing for their lives if the weapon is trained on them, respond with deadly force.

In some communities, law enforcement and social service agencies are starting to work together to respond to mental health emergencies and other social issues with the goal of connecting people with the services they need before they suffer a potentially violent crisis.

Ben Brubaker, co-director of the White Bird Clinic in Eugene, Oregon, said the co-responder model is a crucial part of the solution to avoiding tragic outcomes like Shirey's. For more than 30 years, White Bird Clinic has operated Crisis Assistance Helping out on the Streets, or CAHOOTS, which provides police-funded 24/7 coverage for social workers to respond to behavioral health emergencies in Eugene and the neighboring city of Springfield, Oregon.

CAHOOTS has become a model other communities have adopted for their own programs.

The social workers are dispatched by the cities' 911 centers but unarmed and can't force anyone to do anything. They approach potentially volatile situations with the goal of preventing harm to the person in crisis and those who are trying to help.

“Personally, every shift I was on I was able to help somebody stay out of jail and get better connected to services,” Brubaker said. “I know that those things are helping prevent what could be tragic outcomes.”

Between the cities of Eugene and Springfield, CAHOOTS receives about \$2 million in funding, accounting for about 2% of the police budgets. Although Brubaker said CAHOOTS doesn’t track jail diversion statistics, the vast majority of incidents were resolved without police. Out of about 24,000 calls CAHOOTS responded to in 2019, only 311 required police backup and the teams resolved nearly 20% of calls to the city’s public safety dispatch center, according to the Vera Institute for Justice.

Joe Welsh, director of the Lehigh Valley Justice Institute, is leading an effort to implement a co-responder program in Lehigh County and Allentown similar to those in Oregon and closer to home in Bucks County. Welsh said the practice achieves not only harm reduction, but it also helps local governments and economies by diverting people from the criminal justice system and avoiding the societal costs of incarceration.

“You’re taking all of these down-the-road costs out of the equation by treating mental illness as an illness instead of criminalizing it,” Welsh said.

The Allentown Police Department is already working to build a co-responder system by expanding crisis training for officers in cooperation with Lehigh County Mental Health and Cedar Crest College. It is also hiring a second crisis intervention specialist to assist patrol officers with mental health-related issues. It also works with an Allentown-based addiction treatment center to partner a certified recovery specialist with officers following up on drug and alcohol abuse issues, Chief Glenn E. Granitz Jr. said.

Upper Macungie Township police also have been working with social service organizations in Lehigh County to identify individuals who are at risk and take steps to candidly discuss their problems and put them and their families in touch with social service providers who can help, Lt. Peter Nickischer said.

“If we see 20 fewer people incarcerated each year, you’re talking about a couple hundred thousand dollars in savings,” Brace said. “I’m of the

mind that every dollar that we save in incarceration costs we put into some kind of mental health or community-based preventative activity.”

While a successful program could save taxpayers money, the most important saving, Brace said, is “something we can’t put a dollar sign on — a human life.”

Brubaker, of the CAHOOTS program, said that co-responder programs won’t prevent every tragedy and that police must respond when there’s a threat. But in some situations, social workers can defuse situations that police might not. Brubaker recalled one instance where he spoke with a man having a violent episode inside his mother’s house, and got the man’s commitment that Brubaker would be safe if he went in without police.

“It shows how there is room for a different response where a uniformed officer just by his or her presence could retraumatize or escalate the situation,” Brubaker said.

In Shirey’s case, Martin said, police were responding to a call about domestic violence, and he doesn’t believe a social worker would be able to safely respond to such a call right away. Most of the facts about Shirey’s mental health issues were tied up in medical documents Martin said he had to subpoena to access after the shooting.

Shirey’s father, Karl, and his ex-girlfriend, Alyssa Adams, did not provide police with a clear enough picture of the gravity of Ryan Shirey’s mental health issues, including a diagnosis of schizophrenia, Martin said. No one mentioned that there was a revolver in the house.

“They had no knowledge that they were going into a situation like that,” he said. “If Catasauqua police officers knew he had a gun in the basement, they would not have gone into the basement. They would have called the Municipal Emergency Response Team with trained negotiators.”

In Upper Macungie’s HUB program, the goal is early intervention in situations that have the potential to become more serious. Police officers and social service providers identify residents who may be in need of help and visit them.

Bucks County launched a program last year to embed social workers in the Bensalem Township police department. The community of 60,000 people on the border of Philadelphia had more than 3,300 calls in 2019 when police responded for welfare checks, mental health issues, psychiatric emergencies, suicide attempts, overdoses and domestic disturbances.

“Not too long after the George Floyd incident, I listened to everybody saying police shouldn’t be responding on every type of call,” said Public Safety Director Fred Harran. “We are the only game in town. We’re free, we respond immediately and we don’t ask questions. In these specialized cases, it’s not necessarily the kinds of things we should be responding to.”

Harran said he began researching co-responder programs elsewhere and reached out to social service agencies in Bucks County to float the idea of social workers working with police on calls involving mental health crises, homelessness, child welfare and more complicated issues such as hoarding.

The proposal received support, and county and township officials began developing a framework for two social workers employed by the county to be stationed at police headquarters to respond when officers need them. The program went live in January, and Harran said the department has already seen a reduction in the number of chronic 911 callers who repeatedly summon police for non-law enforcement issues.

In many cases, officers clear the scene as soon as they’re certain there’s no threat and the social workers stay to assess the situation and help the individual connect with services. They also come back to ensure that the person is following through on seeking help and that their needs are being addressed, Harran said.

“Police put a bandage on a bleeding artery,” he said. “With the co-responder, it’s the next level, moving the patient off the battlefield, so to speak, and give them more time.”