

# Olympia has “crisis responders” and a “Familiar Faces” program

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police August 8, 2020

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

Denver has a STAR program like CAHOOTS, so here Olympia, a town smaller than Bethlehem.

Gadfly is at the end of his leads for cities to look at for reforms of Public Safety. Other references much appreciated.

Are you getting any ideas that we might use? The “Familiar Faces”?

And maybe a better notion of what “defunding the police” means?

One would hope somebody is putting together a portfolio of such models for the Police, Council, and a Community Engagement Initiative to explore for possible ideas applicable to Bethlehem.

*from Christie Thompson, “This City Stopped Sending Police to Every 911 Call.” The Marshall Project, July 24, 2020.*

But over a year ago, Olympia started taking a different approach to nonviolent incidents caused by someone experiencing mental illness, addiction, or homelessness. Instead of sending armed officers to respond, the city dispatches “crisis responders” to diffuse the situation and connect the individual with services—a model now being considered by a growing number of cities across the U.S.

That day, instead of a police officer, the woman had two “crisis responders” knocking on her door, carrying only a radio and a backpack of clean clothes.

Police respond to a wide range of problems, many of them relatively minor or involving someone having a psychotic episode or sleeping on

the streets. Using civilian first responders instead, advocates of this approach say, keeps interactions from escalating into violence, and diverts people from jail and toward social services. It also frees up police resources to focus on more serious crime.

Those encounters can also be deadly: An analysis by the Washington Post found roughly 1 in 4 fatal police shootings involved someone with mental illness. Recent shootings have left many asking what would have happened had police never been involved. Would Rayshard Brooks—shot by the Atlanta police officer who found him sleeping in his car—still be alive if an unarmed social worker had instead knocked on his window and asked if he had somewhere safe to sleep?

Handling violent crime accounts for as little as 4 percent of an officer's time at work. And delegating other crises—such as mental health or addiction issues—to non-law enforcement is an idea gaining traction. A recent survey found 68 percent of voters supported the creation of a “new agency of first responders.” (However, just a quarter of Americans say they support “reducing funding” for police departments.)

The idea took off in Olympia thanks to a former police chief who had worked in Eugene [where the CAHOOTS program is]. The crisis team's roughly \$550,000 budget is funded through a public safety levy, which was passed by voters in 2017. Now, the Crisis Response Unit is contracted by the police department, on call daily from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. From April through June of this year, the team made over 500 contacts with community members.

Here's no strict protocol for when the unit gets called instead of police. Only a fraction of the calls it receives come directly from 911 operators. Instead, the team is often contacted by social service providers, or is sent by police who recognize a situation is better suited for the team's skills. Most often, they provide services while doing outreach with those sleeping in homeless encampments or downtown Olympia, or following up from previous calls.

In a small city like Olympia, with roughly 52,000 residents, team members say they know half the people they come into contact with—a helpful familiarity that will be harder for bigger cities to establish. Most of their job is problem-solving for people with few good options: the elderly woman with dementia who keeps trying to hitch-hike away from her shelter; the woman with mental illness convinced a motel manager has stolen her luggage; the kid who keeps getting kicked out of treatment; the older man who won't stop calling 911.

One of the biggest challenges, team members say, is a lack of long-term services in the Olympia area, especially for mental health care. They often get called to assist the same people over and over again. Olympia runs a “familiar faces” program to help fill this gap, which pairs peer navigators with people who have frequent run-ins with law enforcement, to connect them with housing, addiction treatment and other resources. That program served 26 people last year; they recently received funding to serve up to 100 clients

Because they work closely with the Olympia Police Department and are dispatched through 911, Larsen said the program had to build community trust to prove they were “collaborative but separate” from law enforcement. “One of the biggest things we had to overcome is the idea that we would be snitches,” she said. “It’s about reassuring folks that we don’t run [their names] for warrants or anything like that.” Larsen noted that working with police makes it easier to access some services, like getting people identification.

Allowing crisis responders to take the lead will take time. In the past year, the Olympia team says police officers are already deferring more calls to them and trusting them in a wider range of circumstances. But police still respond to most suicide calls, for example, out of fear that there might be a weapon.

“I think they’re hesitant to let us just show up,” said Aana Sundling, a crisis team member, walking into the encampment, where most of the

residents seem to know her. “They’re worried about our safety. But the cops are becoming more aware. We’ve been out here for over a year and none of us have been assaulted.”