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# 'CAHOOTS': How Social Workers And Police Share Responsibilities In Eugene, Oregon

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Heard on All Things Considered

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NPR's Ari Shapiro talks with crisis workers at the White Bird Clinic in Eugene, Ore., about their Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets program as an alternative to police intervention.

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

You call 911, you generally get the police. It's a one-size-fits-all solution to a broad spectrum of problems from homelessness to mental illness to addiction. Protesters are urging cities to redirect some of their police budget to groups that specialize in treating those kinds of problems. Now we're going to look at one model that's been around for more than 30 years. In Eugene, Ore., a program called CAHOOTS is a collaboration between local police and a community service called the White Bird Clinic. Ben Brubaker is the clinic coordinator, and Ebony Morgan is a crisis worker.

Thank you both for joining us.

BEN BRUBAKER: We're glad to be here.

EBONY MORGAN: Yeah, thank you for having us.

SHAPIRO: So, Ben, if I'm in Eugene and I call 911, when does that call get routed to your team instead of to the police?

BRUBAKER: The calls that come in to the police non-emergency number and/or through the 911 system, if they have a strong behavioral health component, if there are calls that do not seem to require law enforcement because they don't involve a legal issue or some kind of extreme threat of violence or risk to the person, the individual or others, then they will route those to our team - comprised of a medic and a crisis worker - that can go out and respond to the call, assess the situation, assist the individual if possible, and then help get that individual to a higher level of care or necessary service if that's what's really needed.

SHAPIRO: And you get about 20% of the calls to 911, is that right?

BRUBAKER: Yeah, it's probably a little bit higher than that. We respond a lot of days kind of back-to-back calls.

SHAPIRO: So, Ebony, when you show up on the scene, are you carrying any of the paraphernalia that a police officer would have? Do you have a uniform, handcuffs, a weapon?

MORGAN: So we are a lot more casual in appearance.

SHAPIRO: (Laughter) OK.

MORGAN: The tools that I carry are my training. I carry my de-escalation training, my crisis training and a knowledge of our local resources and how to appropriately apply them. I don't have any weapons, and I've never found that I needed them.

SHAPIRO: How often do you have to? Escalate? I mean, how often is your training just not enough to handle the problem.

MORGAN: So last year, out of a total of about 24,000 calls, 150 times we called for police backup for some reason, so not very often.

SHAPIRO: Can you give us an example of when you do need to call in the police?

MORGAN: If we believe that someone is in danger especially or is an immediate threat to others. For an example, if somebody is insisting on walking into traffic, I can't ethically just allow them to get hit by a car. But I also cannot restrain them. That is not my job. So that might be an instance where I need to call.

SHAPIRO: Ben, give us some numbers. How much does the program cost, and what measures do you have of its success?

BRUBAKER: Well, I would say that right now the program costs, with all of the combined programs both in Eugene and Springfield, around \$2.1 million a year.

SHAPIRO: To put that in perspective, the Eugene Police Department's annual budget is about \$70 million and Springfield is about \$20 million.

BRUBAKER: We estimate that we save over \$15 million a year in cost savings, both through our ER diversion, through picking up calls that would otherwise have to be handled by law enforcement or EMS - a more expensive response - and through (unintelligible) diversion.

SHAPIRO: Ebony, has your work in this program changed your view of police and law enforcement?

MORGAN: I came into this work passionate about being part of an alternative to police response because my father died during a police encounter. So it matters to me very much.

SHAPIRO: Oh, I'm so sorry.

MORGAN: Thank you. I'm not alone in that, so I'm really passionate about this. I think policing may have a place within this system, but I also think that it's over-utilized as an immediate response because it just comes with a risk. And it's a risk that crisis response teams that are unarmed don't come with. You know, in 30 years, we've never had a serious injury or a death that our team was responsible for. And I think that's important to note. I also recognize that my experiences are not isolated. And so I try to acknowledge where I believe there is room for improvement. And I think that

models like this can help people have support in their community and feel safer within their community.

SHAPIRO: Ebony Morgan and Ben Brubaker of the CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Ore., thank you both for talking with us.

MORGAN: Thank you so much. Happy to be here.

BRUBAKER: Thank you.

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