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In Cahoots: How the unlikely pairing of cops and hippies became a national model

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In 1969, hippies in Eugene did not trust the cops. More than that, they wanted a community service of their own. So a ragtag collective of like-minded activists, medics and social workers founded the White Bird Clinic.

When the prospect of the group's emergency response team working with the police to start the program CAHOOTS came up 20 years later, there was some uncertainty.

"We were a bunch of hippies, and actually a fairly anarchistic bunch of hippies," said David Zeiss, a co-founder of CAHOOTS. "It was really an interesting question, whether we could forge a working relationship with Eugene Police Department."

Despite original trepidation, the organization's now 30-year-old mobile crisis-response program, an odd marriage of police resources and counterculture philosophies, has found such success that leadership from nearly 20 cities has contacted the program to get a hold of its blueprint.

CAHOOTS stands for Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets, but it's a bit tongue-in-cheek. While the White Bird Clinic from its founding had unofficial relationships between police departments in the area and its mobile crisis teams, the birth of CAHOOTS marked the formal beginning of an unlikely pair.

"After much hesitation and discussion on our side and probably a lot of hesitation and discussion on the police side also — although they didn't share all that with us and we didn't share our discussions with them — we decided to give it a try," Zeiss said.

Dispatched through the Eugene police-fire-ambulance communications center and through the Springfield non-emergency number, CAHOOTS provides a unique response to non-violent situations. In mostly 12-hour shifts, teams made up of a medic and a crisis worker respond to urgent medical or psychological crises. They attend to people suffering with addiction, disoriented people, mental health emergencies and sometimes homeless people in danger of getting a ticket, in order to assess, aid and make a plan to help. Between the two cities it serves, CAHOOTS responds to around 23,000 calls a year.

On July 4, 1989, CAHOOTS began its first shift funded by EPD with a second-hand beat-up van. When emergency dispatch received calls that required help but not law enforcement, they routed the call to CAHOOTS. At first, the group worked 40 hours a week, and they have since expanded to 24-hour service, four crisis vans and a total of nearly 50 employees.

The odd couple

“Oftentimes, law enforcement has been thrust into the mental health field,” said Sgt. Rick Lewis, the Springfield Police Department’s CAHOOTS coordinator. “(People) are calling for police because who else do you call, but clearly, it’d be more beneficial for CAHOOTS to show up.”

CAHOOTS’ relationship with EPD was fundamental to its creation, but it hadn’t officially joined Springfield Police until 2015 when Lane County provided a grant for the program. Lewis said CAHOOTS has more flexibility when it responds to a crisis situation; the police can only transport people in handcuffs.

“We’re the police, we’re not a taxi or an ambulance,” Lewis said. “We’re being put into these situations more and more where we’re dealing with mental health, transients or homeless people seeking services, etcetera. You can see where that becomes problematic.”

Lewis, along with other public safety leadership, said the police are overwhelmed responding to issues that don’t concern law enforcement and people who don’t pose a threat to anyone other than themselves. White Bird

Administrative Coordinator Ben Brubaker said this includes mental health emergencies, issues around homeless and issues around addiction.

“It’s all fallen on them, any place that our system is broken, it falls to law enforcement, and they’re equally frustrated and don’t know what to do,” Brubaker said.

Enter CAHOOTS, a nonprofit, non-government and non-police organization that wants to support anyone in crisis. It has the freedom to provide transportation, the bandwidth to follow-up with clients and rapport within disenfranchised communities.

“Our staff is honored to support and bear witness to people in their darkest hours,” said Kate Gillespie, a clinical coordinator for CAHOOTS.

Gillespie has worked for CAHOOTS for nine years. She said the program goes beyond being altruistic — it’s cost effective. They take up a little more than 1% of the EPD budget but respond to around 17% of the calls they receive. The group estimates it’s saved \$6 million in medical services costs alone.

Tentative start

But the relationship between White Bird and police began tentatively. White Bird members built an alternative to policing. They were a safe place for those who didn’t trust the cops. The oddity of the pairing was spelled out in the group’s irreverent name — they were now “in cahoots” with the police.

However, CAHOOTS co-founder Zeiss said the new team came together surprisingly well.

“There was some resistance from some of the officers at the start because they knew that money was being paid to CAHOOTS that could have gone to cover more uniformed police officers on the streets and they were skeptical of that,” Zeiss said. “So we sort of had to prove ourselves. ... It took maybe a year or two for the police and the wider community to get the idea of what CAHOOTS was and how they could use us.”

Suspensions and separate philosophies aside, cops tired of responding to situations outside of their training ultimately welcomed the help. The relationship between CAHOOTS workers and police officers transformed beyond being workable. Some people have worked for CAHOOTS and moved to EPD, and vice-versa.

Shared experiences fostered a level of understanding and sympathy that have inextricably bound one group to the other.

“We think they’re great. They provide a different avenue than just handcuffs,” Lewis from Springfield police said. “We have limited resources. For patrol, we typically are only staffing six or seven officers out there for our city and so to have this different group, CAHOOTS, come in and have the additional time to spend with these folks to try to get resources and services to them, it’s beneficial most importantly to the person, but also to the department and the city as a whole. So we love them.”

Demand for CAHOOTS services has increased significantly over the years. In 2014, CAHOOTS responded to 9,662 calls. In 2018, CAHOOTS handled 17,440 EPD calls. Some calls require a joint response or CAHOOTS is requested at a police or fire call after it is determined its services are a better match for the particular situation. Between Springfield and Eugene, CAHOOTS responded to a total of 23,000 calls in 2018.

Spreading the good word

Leadership from nearly 20 cities — including Austin, Chicago, Oakland, Denver, New York City and Portland — has reached out to learn more about Eugene’s unique partnership.

“I would love to see other cities apply something similar,” said Matthew Eads, an EMT crisis worker who works with CAHOOTS. “It doesn’t have to be exactly what we do because we’ve been doing it so long, our scope of what we do is pretty enormous. But definitely if cities were willing to at least try and institute some sort of crisis response, that would make a huge difference.”

Eads has worked at CAHOOTS for more than a decade. After college, he was looking for a job as an EMT when he saw an advertised job for CAHOOTS. When he was a teenager, the group had helped a family member through a

crisis. He has the three qualities that Brubaker said make up a trifecta in this line of work: technical knowledge in the area of medical and behavioral health, a belief in client-centered care and personal experience in crisis situations.

“That helps to make sure that they bring the level of empathy and compassion to the work that we expect of our workers, and that that’s a really tricky mix to sometimes find,” Brubaker said.

CAHOOTS has spent 30 years getting to where it is — gathering employees like Eads and fostering relationships with community groups — but Brubaker isn’t that worried other cities will need 30 years to achieve similar success. He said they’ve tested, improved and tweaked the CAHOOTS model enough that they can confidently offer it to other cities.

“It’s about resource alignment and better use of resources,” said Robert King, the senior policy advisor on public safety for Portland Mayor Andy Wheeler. “Given what we’ve seen at CAHOOTS, the effectiveness of that program, it has demonstrated to us that this alternative approach is a good one.”

King said the Portland mayor’s interest in the model was piqued when he saw an article about CAHOOTS in Street Roots, a Portland newspaper and media source that advocates for people experiencing homelessness. In January, Mayor Wheeler visited Eugene to take a look at CAHOOTS’s system. A coalition of public safety professionals and nonprofits still are in the report-writing phase but hope to make a recommendation to the city by next month. The Portland City Council has set aside \$500,000 for a pilot program. CAHOOTS’ 2018 budget was \$1.8 million.

King retired from the Portland Police Bureau as North Precinct commander in 2017 after a 27-year career. He described evolving understandings of policing and evolving community expectations that demand a new solution.

The city of Denver also has been in the news for its efforts to implement a CAHOOTS-style model. Denver police and community service groups visited Eugene to shadow CAHOOTS teams in May.

“When you’re holding a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Police are holding hammers, they have paramilitary training and legal training. And when you have a schizophrenic young man who is disoriented, neither of those hammers are actually applicable,” said Roshan Bliss, co-chair of the police accountability nonprofit Denver Justice Project.

The nonprofit and other community organizations and Denver law enforcement are participating in working groups to try to develop a pilot process and eventually launch a permanent system.

Police reform advocates in Denver, along with many cities across the country, have been reflecting on the role of police and an increasingly urgent need to help people suffering with mental illnesses and addiction outside of the law.

“When you call the police, they use their hammers and treat the problem like a nail,” Bliss said. “And what we’re trying to do is create screwdrivers and wrenches and backhoes and all kinds of different tools that we might need to address the issues that come up in our community that can’t be handled by police.”

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