

PORTLAND STREET RESPONSE

Street Roots lays out a feasible plan for the future of crisis and nuisance intervention in public spaces



VANS

Logoed vans would advertise the program's services and become recognizable as a non-threatening response and assistance service. Vans would be stocked with first-aid supplies, naloxone, water, socks and basic hygiene items.



TEAMS

One firefighter-EMT and one peer support specialist, both with additional de-escalation and behavioral health training.

These teams would be prepared to respond to calls about controlled fires burning in camps and tents, non-life-threatening calls for medical services on the streets, and an array of low-priority calls requesting police services, such as calls for unwanted persons, welfare checks and behavioral health issues.

A peer support specialist would have personal experience with mental health or addictions issues and a working knowledge of how to connect people with programs that initiate services. Teams would also receive de-escalation training similar to CAHOOTS, which primarily responds to and resolves situations without a police escort.

Teams would perform street outreach for fire- and medical-safety-related issues when not responding to calls. This would establish trust in the homeless community and give teams the opportunity to initially engage with some folks outside the context of a crisis.

With input from various public officials and agencies, as well as from Street Roots' position as an organization that works with people experiencing homelessness, we've imagined a street response team that would alleviate the drain on police resources and serve as an appropriate and compassionate response to street homelessness. This service would begin small and focused on Portland but would eventually expand to serve the entire metro region.

GOAL

Reduce police responses to calls for service involving people experiencing homelessness.

SCOPE

Up to six teams of two, operating mobile response vans 24 hours a day, seven days a week across Portland. Why six teams? While Portland Police Bureau did not answer our inquiry into how many teams it thought would sufficiently address low-priority calls involving people experiencing homelessness, staff at the 911 call center had some ideas. Dispatcher Sandi Goss suggested that three 24-hour teams in Portland – one in downtown, one on the north side and one on the east side – would be kept very busy, while BOEC's Operations Manager Lisa St. Helen said six teams spread across the metro area would be "a good start." For the purposes of this plan, we're focused on areas within Portland's city limits, but we're going with six teams to allow for some community outreach and meaningful interactions during peak times, with fewer teams operating during the night.



COST

At most, each 24-hour unit would cost about \$800,000 annually, including salary and operating costs. If all six units operated around the clock every day of the week, the program would cost about \$4.8 million per year. This figure, however, does not include start-up costs, such as training, or the cost of administration.

This cost estimate is based on Portland Fire & Rescue's cost of operating its Rapid Response Vehicle teams. These two-person teams of highly trained firefighter EMTs respond to lower-acuity medical calls in an SUV. Of the roughly \$800,000 it costs to keep one unit operational annually, nearly \$500,000 is for salaries of the six full-time employees needed to keep one unit operating around the clock 365 days a year.



FUNDING

The city is already spending the money it would cost to implement a street response team to respond to homelessness in a disjointed fashion, in part through the reallocated hours spent among various bureaus. Additionally, funding slated for a pilot project through the police bureau to address low priority calls could be diverted to a non-law enforcement approach instead.

A street response team would come at a cost savings. There would be fewer arrests and jail stays. Eugene's CAHOOTS operates at \$1.6 million per year and has estimated it saves the Eugene Police Department approximately \$8.5 million annually, however EPD argues these savings are hard to quantify.

A street response team would be a public safety program and should not take dollars away from programs aimed at fixing the root causes of homelessness.

WHAT THEY'LL DO

This team will respond to the bulk of disorder calls, including calls about unwanted persons, behavioral health issues, low-priority incidents at camps and other situations that arise on the streets, including non-life threatening medical needs. As such, this team will need tools when asking people to leave certain areas. This will require follow-through and investment from the city and county on shelters, housing and wrap-around services.



OPERATOR

Portland Street Response would be run through Portland Fire & Rescue, either as an expansion of its existing CHAT (Community Health Assessment Team) program or as a third-party organization created for this purpose that works in partnership with the fire department.



DISPATCH

To start, Portland Street Response would be dispatched through BOEC when Portlanders call 911 or the police non-emergency line. Once BOEC's new software is up and running, it can screen for calls to be diverted to this response team. In the meantime, the police sergeant and firefighter stationed at BOEC can assist in determining which calls are appropriate for the street response team. Eventually, Portland Street Response could also have its own number and dispatch, so callers who are familiar with the program could bypass 911 completely.

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