

## **Alternatives to Law Enforcement**

### *National Health Care for the Homeless Conference Workshop*

by Paula Lomazzi

This year's National Health Care for the Homeless Conference was held virtually in May. I attended zoom workshops on racism, advocacy, social media, special health needs of LGBTQ+ consumers, drug policy and addiction treatment, trauma informed care, and consumer leadership. There has been increased interest this year in alternatives to Law Enforcement for first responses to behavioral health crisis, alternatives that could both lessen law enforcement interactions, divert some funding to alternative programs, and ultimately save community funds and save lives.

Camillus Health Concern. First presenter was David Perry, co-chair of the National Consumer Advisor Board and chair of his local health center in Miami, FL. In Miami, as is the case in other cities, criminalization of homelessness is a policy they use that does not work. Homelessness is a product of racist policies shown by the fact that 48% of the nations homeless population are black, while only 13% of the whole population are black. In Miami, the percentages are higher, while in the Overtown neighborhood the percentage is 75% black. At the Camillus Health Concern, their consumer advisory board participate in peer support effective outreach and engagement with Community Health workers.

CAHOOTS. has become widely known as a model for police alternatives. Tim Black of the White Bird Clinic talked about their CAHOOTS Behavioral Health First Response that operates in Eugene and Springfield, OR. They are mobile crisis response teams that are connected to the 911 system. They operate with two vans 24 hours/day and a 3<sup>rd</sup> van operating during peak hours. Each team has two well trained members, a crisis intervention worker and at least one EMT. The team members dress in regular street cloths without utility belts so they do not resemble police or fire department personnel. This usually helps keep people in that are in crisis calmer. They have been in operation for 30 years and have never had a serious injury. Most calls are handled with their expert de-escalation, trauma informed practices, but since they do not practice physically restraining people, sometimes they will call for police support when the situation could become volatile.



They are able to give rides to shelters, services, and non-emergency clinic visits. They have concern about any displacements the resolutions may cause so sometimes they just help the person find a place nearby to sleep.

In 2019, CAHOOTS responded solely to 13,000 dispatches out of a total 105,000 call for service requests through 911. That is a 5-8% rate of diversion from police, fire/ems responses, which was a \$1.5m cost savings to those systems just in Eugene, alone. Community cost savings from

reduced health spending, reduced hospitalization and better health outcomes was estimated at \$14.8m. The annual budget for CAHOOTS is \$2.2m annually.

Montebello Community Assistance Program. The last presenter was Angélica Palmeros of the Montebello Community Assistance Program. It is a homeless mobile outreach service under their Fire Department, funded separately by Los Angeles County. It began last November and was meant to be a specialized team to serve those experiencing crisis and distress that do not require emergency services. They go out in a red vehicle, distribute water, refer services to people, have links to housing and health services, and help with recovery. They are part of the 911 system and can transport people to urgent mental health facilities due to an agreement. When patient is released, they get a call so they can follow up with that person.

These programs aren't concerned with reforming law enforcement, but just to build alternative systems. With these alternatives, though, there are less interactions with police who are often not trained in or prone to community styles of interventions, verbal de-escalation, medical and mental health assessments or are not trusted by some community members in crisis. With less interactions there are less opportunity for bad acting and inappropriate responses. "Defunding Police" merely becomes costs saving, life-saving, more appropriate responses to help people experiencing personal crisis.