

Program

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George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis, CAHOOTS gained national attention. In 2021, Congress passed the CAHOOTS Act, sponsored by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. The legislation offered a framework and Medicaid-based funding model for communities to establish mobile crisis services.

Wyden consulted with White Bird Clinic on the legislation, but the end result described mobile crisis in a way that didn't match CAHOOTS' model. The biggest change was who would provide services: the CAHOOTS Act requires teams of two clinicians, while CAHOOTS vans are staffed with a paramedic and a crisis worker who meets the requirements of a Qualified Mental Health Associate.

"The academics and the regulatory bodies want it to look clinical," Perin said in 2023. "Those who are doing the peer-supported, lived-experience field work, the boots on the ground who've been around for 30 some years, we're saying that that model is not what's needed."

The CAHOOTS Act made Medicaid funding available to mobile crisis services that adopted its model. But CAHOOTS workers were resistant to such a change, noting that in addition to the clinical licensure requirements, it would also mean collecting insurance information from clients, pursuing involuntary holds and a narrower focus on behavioral health.

"To bill Medicaid in order to provide these services, they had to make it behavioral health only," Colehour said. "That is a part of what we do, but that's not what we do, and so there's this intense political pressure for us to become that behavioral health, Medicaid billing service. We need time to do that. We need to maintain integrity to our values and that is the complex political arena that we're sitting in today."

One more change Lisovskis noted is the use of director's holds, which allow a police officer or health professional to involuntarily commit someone for mental illness. She said CAHOOTS workers chose to not become certified to place involuntary holds.

"We believe that non-forced interactions are critical not only to our safety, but also to any solid safety plan," she said. "People really need to be invested in their own plans, building trust, having that force piece not be a piece of the puzzle unless we absolutely need that."

When asked about these concerns, Wyden defended the CAHOOTS Act model, citing "great local feedback" from communities, including Lane County, as well as the number communities who have adopted mobile crisis units thanks to the act.

"Thanks to this law, 22 other Oregon counties in addition to Lane County also



CAHOOTS Medic/Crisis Counselor Michelle Perin, center, looks at an American flag made from colored fire hose during a visit to Eugene Springfield Fire's Station 2 as the long time Eugene crisis intervention organization begins the transition from being under Eugene Police to the fire department in June 2023.

CHRIS PIETSCH/
THE REGISTER-GUARD

have met the federal mobile crisis standard along with 21 other states besides Oregon," Wyden said.

The Oregon 'CAHOOTS bill'

In 2021, the Oregon state legislature passed House Bill 2417, initially nicknamed the CAHOOTS Bill. This legislation aimed to award state funding for cities or counties in Oregon to establish mobile crisis services modeled after CAHOOTS.

The initial draft of the bill followed the CAHOOTS model, defining a mobile crisis team as a two-person team made of a nurse or EMT and a crisis worker and directed Oregon Health Authority to pursue a Medicaid waiver to fund the program. Under the draft, the state government would have matched the contributions of local governments who set up CAHOOTS-like programs.

Legislators modified the final version of the bill to build out the state's whole behavioral crisis system, adding frameworks to establish 988 and crisis stabilization centers.

The amendment also redefined mobile crisis workers as "qualified behavioral health professionals" and said while the state would give some one-time money, in the long-term OHA should explore paying for mobile crisis with "funding from Medicaid, commercial insurance or other funding sources." In other words: the CAHOOTS act model.

The bill also said its purpose was to "ensure that all residents of this state receive a consistent and effective level of behavioral health crisis services no matter where they live, work or travel in the state" which eventually translated into the current OHA mandate that counties provide mobile crisis response.

Lane County Mobile Crisis

Lane County responded by setting up

its own mobile crisis service. In a June 2024 Lane County board meeting, county Health and Human Services leaders explained Lane County was obligated to stand up the service because CAHOOTS' geographical reach was limited to Eugene and Springfield and it didn't use the CAHOOTS act model.

Eve Gray, director of Lane County Health and Human Services, said at the meeting she viewed Lane County Mobile Crisis as a compliment to CAHOOTS.

"Unfortunately, as we're moving forward, there is a splitting of services between behavioral health crisis services and physical health response services for what we are required to perform," she said. "This does not supplant CAHOOTS as a service within our community. Instead it is an addition to the services available."

Eugene's 2025-27 budget

In February, as Eugene looked for cuts that would close its \$115-million budget gap, City Manager Sarah Medary suggested despite what county officials said, CAHOOTS was now a duplicative service.

"If there's somebody else providing that service, those are things that tended to come up on the list (of cuts)" Medary said. "In this case, we have Lane County doing mobile crisis response in a way we didn't two years ago."

Eugene and White Bird end contract

In March White Bird's new executive director sounded the alarm on Medary's suggestion to cut CAHOOTS funding.

"While there are other options in this community, CAHOOTS has been around a really long time and it's garnered the trust of many people and agencies and I'd love to see that continue," Amée Markwardt said in early

March.

Then, in late March, White Bird laid off most of its CAHOOTS workers and said it would provide services for just 12-hours per week in Eugene, citing a lack of funding. In response, Eugene and White Bird mutually terminated their contract.

Where CAHOOTS stands now

In the budget passed by Eugene City Council, a CAHOOTS-like service was not immediately restored.

Instead, it received a placeholder Medary said the city would use to identify a need, solicit bids and negotiate a contract. Budgeting for that service would come later.

Meanwhile, laid off CAHOOTS workers have formed their own nonprofit: Willamette Valley Crisis Care, which aims to return to the streets once it secures funding.

Lisovskis said WVCC is still seeking a fiscal sponsor. The group's July 1 goal "was ambitious" but that once WVCC can secure a sponsor, she said, it shouldn't take long to get into operation. "We've had a ton of amazing nonprofit mentorship support," she said. "And there's a lot of people who want to support us. So I think that we could be really nimble."

At the final budget committee meeting, council members voted against police cuts to pay for CAHOOTS. Councilors said while they support CAHOOTS, police cuts aren't how they want to pay for it.

"I am wholly uncomfortable cutting into volunteers in policing and the drone program," Councilor Matt Keating said. "This is a bit of a reckless and dangerous approach."

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Alternative

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According to the WVCC, crisis response teams with an integrated healthcare model often assist police in Eugene and Springfield on calls involving people who are unhoused or exhibiting signs of a mental health crisis. Calls range from welfare checks to trespassing, public intoxication, disorderly conduct, and more.

"We rely on relational, non-coercive practices and integrated healthcare. Willamette Valley Crisis Care delivers safe and informed interventions and

strives to reduce harm caused by systemic inequity," WVCC officials said.

Searching for funding opportunities

While looking to develop a diverse portfolio of funding options, WVCC is seeking city funds to continue crisis care services in Eugene.

In May, the city's budget committee recommended the city allocate \$500,000 as a placeholder for alternative response, a line item that historically represented the city's contract for CAHOOTS services. The budget was passed on June 23.

The committee also proposed the city

explore funding to fully restore CAHOOTS-like services, estimated at \$2.2 million, a rough calculation both Eugene Springfield Fire Chief Mike Caven and former CAHOOTS workers determined would be necessary.

Laurel Lisovskis, a CAHOOTS worker and co-founder of WVCC, described the budget committee action as "extremely hopeful and reasonable."

A timeline remains unclear for when crisis workers will be back on the streets.

Eugene City Manager Sarah Medary described December as her goal for restoring CAHOOTS-like service to Eugene, while WVCC is looking to start services sooner, once they can secure a

nonprofit fiscal sponsor.

Lisovskis remained optimistic, saying WVCC is close to securing that sponsor and is working to collect data showing the need for the services in the community. Both Lisovskis and Perin declined to identify the organization's potential sponsor.

While funding remains up in the air, Perin said WVCC will continue to do education consulting and training, help other cities develop their own mobile crisis response model and continue helping members of the community.

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