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L.A. WANTS “CAHOOTS.” BUT WHICH “CAHOOTS”?

Some politicians demand that officers keep away from “minor, non-violent” crime



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “[Ideology Trumps Reason](#)” and “[A Conflicted Mission](#)” blamed ideological quarrels for hobbling America’s ability to regulate its borders and control the pandemic. Here we turn to ideology’s insidious effect on crime control, as politicians capitalize on the social movement inspired by [the death of George Floyd](#) to push half-baked plans that would replace police officers with civilians.

For an example we turn to Los Angeles, where [the City Council recently approved](#) a proposal by its “Ad Hoc Committee on Police Reform” to establish “[an unarmed model of crisis response](#).” As presently written, the measure would dispatch civilian teams instead of cops to “non-violent” 9-1-1 calls that “do not involve serious criminal activity” and have at least one of six “social services components”: mental health, substance abuse, suicide threats, behavioral distress, conflict resolution, and welfare checks.

Approved by unanimous vote on October 14, [the move was endorsed](#) the very next day by none other than...LAPD!

The Los Angeles Police Department fully supports the City Council's actions today to establish responsible alternatives to respond to nonviolent calls that currently fall to the Department to handle. For far too long the men and women of the Department have been asked to respond to calls from our community that would be more effectively addressed by others.

So how does George Floyd fit in? Although he’s not mentioned in the actual motion, Mr. Floyd is prominently featured in [an extensive report](#) prepared by the Council’s legislative analyst:

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Following the nationwide protests over the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, calls for a reduced role of law enforcement in nonviolent calls has been reiterated. The need for alternative unarmed models of crisis response has grown out of concerns related to the increased rates of arrest and use of force by law enforcement against individuals dealing with mental illness, persons experiencing homelessness, or persons of color. Armed response has been noted to be incompatible with healthcare needs or the need for other services, including service for the unhoused community.

Analyst Andy Galan isn't out on a limb. On the very day the motion passed, its most prominent signatory, [former council president Herb Wesson, Jr.](#) argued that George Floyd would still be alive and well had civilians handled the situation instead of cops:

Calling the police on George Floyd about an alleged counterfeit \$20 bill ended his life. If he had been met with unarmed, trained specialists for the nonviolent crime he was accused of, George Floyd would be turning 47 years old today. This plan will save lives.

Is he right? Might non-cops have done better? [Here's a partial transcript](#) of the 9-1-1 call:

Caller: Um someone comes our store and give us fake bills and we realize it before he left the store, and we ran back outside, they was sitting on their car. We tell them to give us their phone, put their (inaudible) thing back and everything and he was also drunk and everything and return to give us our cigarettes back and so he can, so he can go home but he doesn't want to do that, and he's sitting on his car cause he is awfully drunk and he's not in control of himself.

Mr. Wesson suggests that Mr. Floyd met all three conditions of the proposed model. His behavior was not (at first) violent. And assuming that stealing cigarettes is no big deal, neither was there any "serious criminal activity." As for that "social service need," the complainant reported that Mr. Floyd was "not in control of himself." Check, check, check.

Alas, it's only after the fact that one often learns "the rest of the story." As a chronic drug user with a [criminal record](#) that includes armed robbery, Mr. Floyd was hardly a good candidate for civilian intervention. Watch [the video](#). His odd, unruly behavior led the first cop with whom he tangled to conclude, probably correctly, that the small-potatoes thief was in the throes of [excited delirium](#). Really, had Mr. Floyd complied instead of fought, that hard-headed senior officer we criticized wouldn't have entered the picture and things could have ended peaceably.

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No, guns and badges aren't always necessary. Yet when a shopkeeper calls and complains they've just been swindled (Mr. Floyd copped some smokes with a fake twenty) and the suspect's still around, dispatching civilians, and only civilians, seems a stretch. Gaining compliance from someone who's been bad isn't always easy. Even "minor" evildoers might have a substantial criminal record. Or maybe a warrant. Seemingly trivial, non-violent offending is potentially fraught with peril, and as your blogger has personally experienced, situations can morph from "minor" to potentially lethal in an instant. At the bottom of our list (though not necessarily in terms of its importance) 9-1-1 callers might feel slighted should they be denied a uniformed police presence.

Considering the negatives, one can't imagine that any law enforcement agency would endorse handing off response to "minor" crimes to civilians. That's not to say that mental-health teams can't be useful. [LAPD has long fielded SMART teams](#) that include specially-trained police officers and a mental health clinician. They're used to supplement beat cops in select, highly-charged situations that could easily turn out poorly. Far more often, though, officers tangle with homeless and/or mentally ill persons who don't require the intense, specialized services of a SMART team but whose shenanigans could tie things up for extended periods. It's for such situations, we assume, that the chief would welcome a civilian response.

That's where [Eugene's "CAHOOTS" initiative](#) comes in. It's the model the city council recommended for adoption in L.A. Here's another extract from the analyst's report:

CAHOOTS...teams consist of a medic (a nurse, paramedic, or EMT) and a crisis worker...Responders are able to provide aid related to crisis counseling, suicide prevention, assessment, intervention, conflict resolution and mediation, grief and loss counseling, substance abuse, housing crisis, first-aid and non-emergency medical care, resource connection and referrals, and transportation to services.

Sounds great, right? But there's a Devil in the details. Read on (*italics ours*):

The CAHOOTS response staff are not armed and do not perform any law enforcement duties. *If a request for service involves a crime, potentially hostile individual, or potentially dangerous situation, the call is referred to the EPD.*

Oops. Here's how an Oregon CAHOOTS team member [described its protocol](#) (*italics ours*):

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

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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....

Police-citizen encounters have become grist for a mill of ideologically-driven solutions that overlook the complexities and uncertainties of the police workplace. George Floyd is but one example. Our [Use of Force](#) and [Conduct and Ethics](#) sections have many others. Say, the tragic case of [Rayshard Brooks](#), the 27-year old Atlanta man who was shot dead after he fired at a cop with the Taser he grabbed from the officer's partner. That incident, which happened in June, began with a call from a local Wendy's complaining that a driver was asleep and blocking the drive-through lane. (Incidentally, that's not even a crime.) The encounter began amicably. But when the seemingly pleasant man failed a field sobriety test and realized he was being arrested for drunk driving he went ballistic and a vicious struggle ensued. (Click [here](#) for the videos.)

It turns out that just like Mr. Floyd, Mr. Brooks had a history of violence and was on felony probation. Oops.

Back to L.A., where the Council's incarnation of CAHOOTS sits on Mayor Eric Garcetti's desk. Hizzoner once opined that Mr. Floyd was "[murdered in cold blood](#)," so one figures that he also hankers for change. But given the realities of the streets – and the need to keep retailers and 9-1-1 callers happy – we suspect that the mayor will artfully massage things so that cops continue to be dispatched to "minor, non-violent" crimes. That, in any event, was obviously what Police Chief Michel Moore expected when he endorsed Oregon's version of Cahoots.

Of course, the City Council would have to swallow its collective pride. Thing is, council members aren't appointed – they're elected. Los Angeles is a big place with a complex socioeconomic mix. Lots of residents have expressed a desire for change, and they hold the power of the vote. So we'll see.