



COUNCIL MEMBER LETITIA PLUMMER DDS

Houston City Council At-Large Position 4

CIRT +

The Houston Police Department's Mental Health Division (MHD) is one of the most innovative, and effective models of crisis intervention in the country. The programs administered under the Division have consistently ranked as among the vanguard of modern policing—as evidenced by the many other municipalities that send their own police department's ambassadors to learn from our instructors.

With its Crisis Intervention Response Team (CIRT), Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), and Crisis Call Diversion (CCD) program (and various other innovations), one might be forgiven for thinking the Division had reached its own zenith of novelty. One of the most difficult feats to manage for any organization is to outperform itself when already standing tall as an industry leader. But in the City of Houston, that's what we do. It is in that spirit that we propose to challenge the Mental Health Division to outclass itself yet again by adopting and fashioning its own version of Eugene, Oregon's Crisis Assistance: Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) Program in combination with its already renown CIRT program.

Under CIRT, an officer trained in 40 hours of crisis intervention (double what the State requires) is paired with a mental health worker, and the two-person team uses a police vehicle to respond to mental health crisis calls together. Under CAHOOTS, a mental health care worker and a medic, each with 500 hours of field training (in addition to classroom time), are paired together. There are many reasons why pairing a mental health care worker with a medic is advantageous to pairing such a worker with an armed officer.

As CAHOOTS Administrative Coordinator Benjamin Brubaker points out, is the fact that such a pairing provides a more holistic look at the person being serviced, as sometimes mental health issues present themselves as medical issues and vis-a-versa. The CAHOOTS model uses a van with no police department markings. However, more important than the appearance of the non-threatening CAHOOTS vehicle, is the equipment contained within it. Each CAHOOTS van is stocked with medical supplies one might expect to find in a clinic.

An analysis of the 4,915 calls serviced by CIRT in 2019 demonstrates the unit performs admirably, being tasked with responding to some of the most intractable mental health calls in the city. It is also clear that the 12 officers assigned to the unit and their mental health partners can only handle the most acute of intervention calls. The Mental Health Division uses a network



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of world-class telehealth solutions to expand its reach and service, but we still would like to see the field operation buttressed with a CAHOOTS-like unit.

By no means does the creation of a CAHOOTS-like program necessitate the dissolution of the CIRT program. In fact, it's easy to envision how the two programs could work naturally alongside one another. In a CIRT + CAHOOTS model, CIRT responders could be used to continue to take on the most acute mental health calls that may escalate to the need for restraints or detention of an individual; while CAHOOTS responders could attend to a wider array of less acute calls for service.

It costs the White Bird Clinic, the organization behind CAHOOTS, roughly \$800,000 per year to service nearly one fifth of the 100,000 plus calls for service from Eugene's police department. To achieve a similar coverage for Houston's population, it would cost roughly \$18.4 million per year. That would mean twenty-three CAHOOTS vans providing coverage to the city, or put another way, about \$800,000 worth of programming (staff, equipment, operational costs) for every 100,000 residents.

RECOMMENDATION:

I recommend the Task Force examine and report back on how a blend between the City's CIRT Program and the City of Eugene's CAHOOTS program might function with and alongside one another in the City of Houston. Included in the report should be:

- Financial considerations for a CIRT + CAHOOTS program consisting of:
 - 23 medically-equipped vans based on the CAHOOTS model.
 - 23 EMS/ Mental Health professional pairings (teams) working a peak and off-peak shift schedule.
- The potential effects a CIRT + CAHOOTS model as detailed above could have on HPD response times to varying priority calls.
- Potential sources of funding for such a program.



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INDEPENDENT POLICE OVERSIGHT BOARD

The entire structure of the Independent Police Oversight Board (IPOB) should be reconsidered, beginning first with how its membership is selected. The composition of the body should be removed from a Mayoral selection - Council approval appointment, to a combination of the popular election of its Chair and the appointment of its other members by individual District City Council Members. New criteria for its members should be set, emphasizing a range of lived experiences *and* professional knowledge and background of the matters which may appear before them.

Second, IPOB's operations should be made more robust and funded. So long as IPOB's sole responsibility is to review the Internal Affairs Division's investigations, IPOB does not need funding. However, if IPOB is made responsible for conducting its own independent investigations, and reporting its independent findings, and issuing binding judgements, and not mere recommendations—as I believe a revamped version of the body should—then IPOB's operations should be funded.

Third, IPOB should continue to investigate the most serious of complaints, allegations of excessive force, the discharging of fire arms, and any allegations of criminality, however, a fully-funded and properly staffed auxiliary unit should be equipped to receive notification of, and investigate less serious, but still impactful, complaints made by the public to Division Supervisors. Citizens should be able to lodge these complaints through a web portal. A portal should be procured that not only allows the public to send allegations of wrong-doing on the part of police officers, but also allow the public to see other misconduct files within an officer's case history.

TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

Lastly, IPOB should have subpoena power. In its current configuration—IPOB functioning as an internal check to the Department's internal investigations—there is a free flow of the sharing of information. One might hope for the same level of openness and transparency were IPOB's relation to the Department change to that of wholly independent and separate body. However, a more legally formalized relation between IPOB and the Department may also be necessary to accommodate any newly formed powers and responsibilities IPOB may hold. That more formalized relationship should be established by granting a fully-funded, independent IPOB, subpoena power, and immediate access to scenes of officer-involved shootings to question witnesses (all members should undergo whatever necessary training to do such).



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RECOMMENDATION

The Task Force should consider the costs of:

- A funded IPOB, capable of processing its own investigations either through:
 - A dedicated staff
 - Contracting members of the District Attorney's office, or other legal professionals
- A two-way functional web portal allowing for the public to:
 - Register complaints of misconduct directly to the IPOB
 - Review elements of an officer's case file
- Maintaining the portal (including staff) annually
- Electing the Chairman of the Board

The Task force should consider the following reforms:

- Popular election of the Chair
- Appointment of members by District Council Members and the Mayor
 - An equal number for the Council and the Mayor (22 members + an elected Chair in total)
- Subpoena Power
- Entirely independent investigations
- Immediate access to officer-involved shootings



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Letitia Plummer".

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