

The Register-Guard

Opinion

Skinner and Zaludek: A critical time for community safety

By Chris Skinner and Joe Zaludek

Posted Apr 14, 2019 at 12:01 AM

Have you or someone you know had a car broken into? Packages stolen from your front porch? Perhaps you called 911 after coming home, only to discover the Eugene Police Department had no capacity to respond. The number of people and businesses experiencing crime and the inability of police to help them is becoming an all-too-familiar story. This is not acceptable.

Here's the problem: Eugene's public safety system is stretched to capacity and our needs for community safety are growing. If we don't act now, the gap will only get worse, take longer to repair, and cost more to our community.

Trends in community safety and livability are moving in the wrong direction:

- Daily average calls for police services increased 21 percent from 2014-2017, while staffing has remained flat.
- Homicide, rape, robbery, assault, sex offenses and family offenses increased by 18 percent in the same time period.
- Police response time also increased 86 percent, from 23 minutes to 42 minutes.
- Police are unable to respond to 1 in 3 non-life-threatening calls for service, an increase of 40 percent between 2014-2017.
- In 2017, Eugene Municipal Court handled 5,000 misdemeanor criminal cases (like theft, disorderly conduct, or driving under the influence) — second in the state only to Multnomah County's Circuit Court.

We didn't get here overnight. As Eugene grows, so does the need for public safety services. These services receive 60 percent of city general funds, yet the effects of the recession and inflation prevent them from keeping pace with our needs. Additionally, today's public safety problems — including substance use, mental health issues and chronic homelessness — take more time and resources.

For the past five years, we have been working to optimize available resources and become more efficient to better serve our community. We focused on best practices in 21st century policing — creating programs such as the Community Outreach Response Team and Community Court to provide a helping hand to our most vulnerable citizens, and increasing jail capacity to hold serious offenders accountable.

We've implemented basic life support response for non-life-threatening calls to the Fire Department and added an advanced life support ambulance unit, which has improved patient outcomes for some of the most critical emergency medical calls for service across both Eugene and Springfield.

Eugene City Council took swift action over the past several years to fund the urgent and important Community Safety System needs. Over the past four years, the council has invested more than \$6 million in public safety services. Last fall, it approved \$8.6 million as a one-time, 18-month down payment and committed to finding a long-term funding plan. The down payment funding expires in June 2020.

We work closely with partners like White Bird, St. Vincent de Paul, and Willamette Family to provide services to our most vulnerable community members. This includes increasing CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) services. Over the last year, CAHOOTS responded to 17 percent of 911 calls, freeing first responders for other calls.

We will continue to look for better and more efficient ways of providing services. But, to fundamentally change our safety trends, we need more capacity. That means increasing officers on the street, dispatchers answering calls and

court staff processing cases, greater capacity to hold and monitor people who commit crimes, more services that provide emergency shelter and connect people to treatment or stable housing, and more efficient ways to respond to non-life-threatening calls.

Meeting these needs is not easy or inexpensive. Our plan adds critical personnel and services, so we can respond to more calls, more quickly, and have the capacity to deter crime, hold chronic offenders accountable and help those who are willing to find a better path. It will take about \$22.8 million a year to reverse the trends we've been seeing across Eugene.

As a community we are at our best when we come together to solve our toughest challenges. We can keep Eugene a welcoming and safe place for all. If you are interested in learning more about our plans to keep our community safe and opportunities to participate, please visit our website at www.eugene-or.gov/CommunitySafety.

Chris Skinner is the chief of Eugene Police Department and Joe Zaludek is the fire chief in Eugene-Springfield.