

Central Park: Addressing Community Livability in Partnership with the Homeless.

Corvallis, Oregon Police Department

Summary:

Many of Corvallis' 59,000 residents enjoy Central Park, located adjacent to downtown, the library, churches, and residential areas. Central Park has also become a convenient 'hangout' location for many homeless community members. The associated behaviors had a significant impact on the rest of the community, including reports of fights, disorderly conduct, public drinking, suspicious activity, and other disturbances or violations of law.

Since 2013, the Corvallis Police Department has implemented at least one Action Plan annually to address livability offenses in Central Park through additional patrols and enforcement. These Action Plans have typically reduced unlawful activities in the park, but the change was generally short-lived.

In 2017 another Action Plan was implemented as a problem solving effort. During the scanning process, we observed an increase in the same types of behaviors from previous years. Reviewing data from preceding years, we saw there were over 300 police responses per year to Central Park in 2014, 2015, and 2016 despite prior Action Plans. In addition to the police data, we engaged the homeless community to analyze the problem. A church adjacent to the park facilitated a series of panel meetings where we identified three themes:

- An adversarial relationship with law enforcement
- Difficulty navigating community resources
- A feeling of 'segregation' from the community

In response to the problem, we continued bimonthly homeless panel meetings to discuss expectations, self-policing, and maintain an open dialogue. We also coordinated the Corvallis Area Resource Event (CARE), a one-day venue for a variety of community resources. Finally, we partnered with the church to hold a National Night Out event in Central Park to promote a greater sense of community.

We assessed the problem over the course of the next year. We found the bimonthly panel meeting was a successful communication endeavor, evidenced by its expansion. The CARE event attendees overwhelmingly indicated they felt better about engaging with the resources they needed. The National Night Out event drew over 100 attendees, establishing dialogue between homeless park users and nearby residents.

These efforts were implemented beginning late in 2017. When comparing 2018 to the preceding five years, there has been a 61.5% reduction in police responses to Central Park, which includes a 41% reduction in livability offenses. Additionally, officers have experienced a 73.9% reduction in proactive responses, enabling them to redirect their efforts elsewhere in the City. Livability has been improved in Central Park, with reduced officer responses.

Scanning:

Corvallis, Oregon is home to over 59,000 residents, and is notable for being the home of Oregon State University. In addition to OSU, the city's largest employers include Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center, Hewlett-Packard, The Corvallis Clinic, and Jacobs Engineering Group. Corvallis prides itself on its sense of diversity, community engagement, and social amenities including 45 parks.

As with many cities, Corvallis has a homeless community. Some of the homeless community in Corvallis participate in behaviors that have a high impact on the rest of the community, engaging in anti-social and/or illegal behavior that often results in calls for service to the Corvallis Police Department.

Central Park [Figure 1] in Corvallis has been an area where high-impact homeless have congregated frequently. Central Park is a community destination based on its close proximity to downtown, the library, churches, and residential areas. For the homeless community, it is noteworthy that it is within a few blocks of circuit (state) court, municipal court, parole and probation, a soup kitchen, and the intermodal mall for the free city bus system. Behaviors associated with the homeless community in Central Park affect livability for the rest of the community including reports of fights, disorderly conduct, public drinking, suspicious activity, and other disturbances or violations of law.

In the summer of 2017, CPD again observed an increase in citizen complaints related to anti-social and illegal behaviors in Central Park. Police officers also observed illegal activities continuing and increasing in the park. The common thread with the complaints was that they primarily involved people perceived to be homeless. Complaints from community members included the same type of livability issues noted above, which began to increase throughout the summer months. Community members increasingly reported they did not feel safe using the park. Security staff at the library, which is located across the street from Central Park, reported illegal behaviors at the park affected their patrons. One citizen reported he believed we needed to station a police officer exclusively in Central Park 24 hours a day to solve the problem – not a feasible solution when a typical patrol shift was comprised of one sergeant and five officers for the entire city. A church adjacent to the park ran a daycare; their staff reported frequently

smelling marijuana smoke coming from the park and finding needles in the playground area. The environment of the park was such that they did not feel safe taking the children there to play. A County Commissioner's sentiment summarized public opinion by stating "To put it simply, Central Park is being destroyed, both physically and aesthetically." ["Crackdown set for Central Park", James Day, *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, Sep 22, 2017]

Although the reports about behaviors in Central Park did not involve high-level criminal activity, the volume of calls related to the park and perception of decreased safety warranted directed action to restore community livability. Based on citizen complaints and officer observations, initial diagnosis indicated the primary offenders were perceived to be homeless community members. Officers observed this group was generally at least ten people, but could swell to up to 25 adult men and women.

Analysis:

These issues were not new to Central Park. Beginning in 2013, the Corvallis Police Department has utilized a departmental Action Plan process to address unlawful activity and restore livability. The Action Plan document mirrors the SARA method to identify and evaluate the problem to formulate a response, with an After Action Review to assess the results. Historically, Action Plans related to Central Park have focused on increased presence and directed patrols at the park, including education and enforcement as appropriate. Action Plans were implemented as follows:

- 2013: 30 day duration
- 2014: 30 day duration

- 2015: 90 day duration
- 2015: 60 day duration
- 2016: 45 day duration

The increased response of these Action Plans was successful in addressing illegal activities in Central Park, but the positive changes were short-lived. After the Action Plans ended, illegal and anti-social behaviors again began to rise, necessitating the need for another Action Plan.

Additional efforts had been made to supplement the increased response. In 2015, CPD staff completed a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) assessment of the Central Park, making recommendations to Parks & Rec staff on ways to affect a positive change. Parks & Rec staff only implemented few of the recommended strategies, with minimal impact. CPD also worked with the City Attorney and Parks & Rec staff to implement a Park Trespass Notice, where people violating park rules (including violations of law) could be trespassed from all City parks for a period based on the nature of their violation. This tool had some impact, but ultimately did not bring about a meaningful, sustainable change.

In 2017, department staff were again tasked with addressing increasing unlawful behavior in the park. When evaluating police response to Central Park for that year, we learned officers had responded to 80 calls for service between June 1st and September 21st, and conducted 32 proactive patrols. However, this had not resulted in a significant change in behavior. Based on past practice we knew a more directed approach would change the behaviors, but we needed to come up with a novel approach for a more sustainable solution.

CPD has experienced success in addressing livability issues related to OSU students by involving the students themselves in the problem-solving process. Although involving homeless

community members in the problem-solving process would pose some unique challenges, we assessed this strategy was worth attempting.

Chief among the challenges of this strategy was recognizing the likely difficulty of any productive participation if the meetings were police-driven at the police department. We therefore contacted Reverend Matt Gordon, Senior Minister of the First Christian Church, to collaborate on a panel meeting that would bring the police department and homeless community leaders (identified by Reverend Gordon) together to work on solutions to the Central Park problem. The First Christian Church is directly across the street from the park, and hosts a Stone Soup meal program as well as a daytime drop-in center for the homeless. We explained the problem and our desire to work together with the homeless community to restore lasting livability to Central Park.

As we were working through the logistics of creating a Homeless Livability Panel, we also increased patrols and enforcement consistent with past efforts as part of an Action Plan that began on September 21st, 2017. CPD felt additional pressure when a Corvallis City Councilor snapped a picture of a homeless person sleeping in the park, and expressed during a City Council meeting that City staff were not doing enough to address the problem. [“Councilor blasts city for Central Park problems”, James Day, *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, Oct 17, 2017] [Figure 2]

On October 20th, 2017, the first Homeless Livability Panel was held at the First Christian Church; it was attended by Reverend Gordon, two members of the Corvallis Police Department Community Livability Unit, two homeless advocates, and three homeless community members. Although these initial meetings were partially related to our response to the problems at Central Park, they primarily served as part of the analysis of the issues. We wanted to collaborate with the homeless community to understand the dynamics of the anti-social behavior in the park to

work towards an appropriate response. Beginning with the initial meeting, we made it clear the purpose of the group was not to “solve the homeless problem,” but to work in partnership to ensure all community members (regardless of housing status) felt safe to use the park in lawful, appropriate manner.

From the first few meetings we identified three common themes that revealed the underlying conditions that contributed to the ongoing problem:

1. Poor communication. The police/homeless relationship is typically adversarial; issuing citations alone does not effectively communicate the need for appropriate behavior, and does not constitute any significant loss to most homeless people.
2. Available resources are difficult to navigate. Corvallis has a wide variety of resources available, but homeless community members have a difficult time engaging, since they often require multiple providers; since ‘the system’ is too complicated, there is no motivation to engage with the multitude of resources to affect positive change.
3. Homeless feel segregated from the community. Homeless panel members expressed that they felt like outcasts, and in turn were not concerned about how they interacted with the rest of the community; changing anti-social behaviors did not represent any benefit.

Response:

The goal of this response was to see a sustained reduction in total police responses to Central Park, decreasing the overall amount of time officers spent at the park while increasing the livability of the area for all users. Because of the chronic nature of the problem, success

would best be measured on an annual basis, rather than a monthly basis. Based on our assessment we endeavored to accomplish this goal by:

1. Establishing increased patrols and education/enforcement to affect an immediate change, even though this tactic had proven to be short-lived.
2. Establish and maintain routine communication with homeless community members.
3. Examine the feasibility of establishing an event that brought a wide variety of social service providers to one location so those in need (including homeless) could initiate engagement at one time/place.
4. Evaluate opportunities for community engagement between homeless park users and the surrounding neighborhood to build a better relationship on both sides.

Establishing increased patrols did affect change quickly, as with past Action Plans. As a police-driven effort, we recognized this was not likely to eliminate all issues or produce a long-term solution. However, we still had a community expectation to address the problem immediately, based on continued calls for service.

In addition to the increased patrols, CPD staff were able to refresh and resubmit a CPTED assessment for the park. Parks & Rec staff were more receptive to the input in 2017, since several of their staff were formally trained in CPTED that year, and implemented more recommendations. However, the improved vegetation management plan that resulted had the unintended consequence of allowing offenders to see approaching officers sooner, affecting our ability to observe violations. We came up with novel approaches to adapt to this change, including sending plainclothes officers into the park as observers and surveilling the park from the library rooftop and a fire escape on a church adjacent to the park. The plainclothes officer approach did not work well -- the offenders often knew the officers on sight even without the

uniform. Surveilling the park was more successful, but also required more resources – one or two officers to observe, plus officers to respond to violations – and could not be as widely utilized as an option.

The Action Plan was initially designed for a one-month duration, but due to continuing complaints was extended to two months total. During that time, officers conducted 127 proactive patrols and 26 people were cited/arrested in the park.

We had already established communication through the Homeless Livability Panel, but in the interest of continuing a dialogue it was clear this was a beneficial endeavor. We relied on Reverend Gordon to recruit homeless community members to participate in the panel meetings as well as using the church as a ‘neutral’ meeting place. Initially the meeting date/time was adjusted to facilitate as many attendees as possible, but this was difficult for people to keep track of. We found greater success with sticking with the same meeting time on the first and third Wednesdays of the month to ensure everyone knew when to be there. We also quickly learned each time a new homeless panel member participated, there was an unscheduled ‘airing of grievances’ at the beginning of the meeting, where the homeless person felt he/she needed to express himself prior to productively engaging in the discussion.

The benefit of the bimonthly panel meeting has proven important. We were able to clearly express the problem to the homeless panel members, as well as gain a better understanding of their sense of community. We learned that many of the homeless people frequenting the park did not approve of the anti-social behavior of some of the other homeless park patrons, but in general they tolerated it to avoid being ostracized from the group. Through these discussions we were, as a panel, able to develop strategies of how the homeless panel members could engage in self-policing to positively impact the park without law enforcement

intervention. Although not directly related to the Central Park issue, the panel also discussed other topics relevant to the group, including how the police department addressed illegal camping.

To address the difficulty in navigating resources that may change a homeless person's personal circumstances, the Homeless Livability Panel provided guidance on what an event might look like that brought the variety of social services together. We learned that such an event had taken place a few years prior, but was no longer held. The pros and cons of the previous event were identified, and input from the homeless panel members was used as the foundation for developing a successful event.

To coordinate the event itself, we reached out to entities we identified as key stakeholders: Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center, the Benton County Health Department, Community Outreach Inc. (a homeless service agency), Community Services Consortium (a resource clearinghouse), and the local United Way (in charge of the local Housing Opportunities Action Council). Although children and families were not part of the problem at Central Park, the Corvallis School District was also identified as a key stakeholder to extend the reach of the event to others in need.

This group of stakeholders met to plan what became the Corvallis Area Resource Event (CARE). This planning committee leveraged existing relationships, conducted outreach, and managed the logistics of the event based on input from the Homeless Livability Panel. The panel provided guidance on location, date, and which social services were most needed or difficult to coordinate for the homeless community.

The CARE event was held on March 6th, 2018 in the parking garage of the Corvallis Library; the library was adjacent to Central Park, and the homeless panel members felt the setting would be more welcoming as a non-religious, less institutional setting where pets were welcome. Over 30 resource providers were on hand offering services including medical screenings, mental health assessments, housing assistance, food bank services, legal aid (civil), employment agencies, the Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles, veteran services, and substance abuse recovery programs. The United Way purchased sandwiches to give out to attendees; police department staff undertook the role of handing out sandwiches as a way to facilitate positive engagement with event participants. While it was not possible to accurately track the exact number of event attendees, it is estimated over 300 people attended.

The final response to the issue was to seek opportunities to create a better sense of community between the homeless park users and the neighboring area. A variety of options were explored (voluntary citizen patrols, combined litter patrols, etc.), but ultimately the most practical was to hold a National Night Out event in Central Park. National Night Out is a community-building campaign that promotes strong police-community partnerships and neighborhood camaraderie to make neighborhoods safer. [natw.org/about] The social, block-party atmosphere seemed like a natural rallying event to build bridges; although the police department supports dozens of National Night Out events throughout the city every year, none had ever been hosted in the Central Park neighborhood.

With the assistance of Reverend Gordon, the Stone Soup meal program volunteered to provide the food for the event; volunteers helped contact area residents and homeless park patrons to invite them to the festivities. On August 7th 2018, the Central Park neighborhood National Night Out event took place in Central Park. Well over 100 people attended, including

both area homeless and residents of the surrounding neighborhood. Reverend Gordon staffed the BBQ, while CPD officers helped with the sno-cone booth and interacted with event guests.

Assessment:

Each of the individual steps were geared towards the goal of producing a sustained reduction in calls for service at Central Park, decreasing the overall amount of time officers spent at the park while increasing the livability of the area for all users.

The first step in addressing the problem was the immediate additional response of police officers to quell the illegal and anti-social behaviors. During the month-long Action Plan, Officers engaged in 85 proactive responses and there were 23 citations/arrests. The Action Plan was extended to a second month, but there was a reduced need for police presence; groups were smaller and less disruptive than before the Action Plan was in place. During the second month proactive police responses declined to 42 and there were only three citations/arrests. Thus, the goal of restoring livability to the park using traditional police methods was accomplished.

The Corvallis Police Department continues to attend bimonthly Homeless Livability Panel meetings. The challenges of conducting a survey or statistical analysis to measure the success of this endeavor precluded using those methods. However, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence to support the success of this effort. A variety of homeless people have participated, reaching a broad base of that community. As word spread that the panel was successful in building communication, other interested parties began participating: a variety of homeless advocates, neighborhood members, the deputy director of the library (where they have similar issues), and a City Councilor have regularly participated. In a community-wide meeting related to

homelessness, a second City Councilor brought up the Panel as a positive effort in addressing livability issues. Others have come to present ideas to the group to gauge support or problems with their proposals, such as a tiny house village. Participation by homeless advocates has helped to build bridges with and change perceptions of CPD. Furthermore, the communication conduit afforded by the panel has had a positive influence on how the city addresses illegal camping by increasing transparency on how the problem is addressed, easing tensions when campsites are posted and cleaned up. The panel continues to meet to date.

To measure the success of the CARE event, we asked attendees to complete voluntary entrance and exit surveys. Plainclothes CPD records staff conducted the entrance survey, while a Homeless Livability Panel member (who was formerly homeless) conducted the exit surveys. Based on those surveys, attendees found the services they were seeking at the event (including housing, food, medical, ID services, and mental health assistance), and they signed up for assistance with related services (housing, food, employment, dental and medical screenings, and mental health assistance). There were only a handful of suggestions for improvement, led by a suggestion for heat (it was an unseasonably cool day). When asked about their outlook of obtaining resources to better their circumstances as a result of the event, 92% of respondents indicated their outlook was ‘somewhat’ or ‘extremely’ positive.

Based on the success of the 2018 CARE event, the event was held again in March of 2019. The number of resource providers rose from just over 30 to over 40; although attendance was down from the previous year, we received feedback that attendees were more interested in engaging with services rather than just looking for handouts, which is the objective of the event. Survey results were similarly positive – 82% of respondents indicated they felt ‘somewhat’ or ‘extremely’ positive about their outlook for obtaining services through of the event. The local

newspaper reported on both CARE events. [“Corvallis police host resource fair for homeless and low-income residents”, Lillian Schrock, *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, Mar 6, 2018; “CARE event held to aid homeless, others”, James Day, *Corvallis Gazette Times*, Mar 20, 2019] [Figure 3, Figure 4]

The National Night Out event was well received. While helping to serve sno-cones, officers had the opportunity to interact with residents and homeless community members, generating numerous conversations. The event was very social, and while some homeless community members came simply to get the free dinner, others took the opportunity to have positive interactions with neighborhood members attending the event. While it is difficult to find a scientific gauge of how the program affected relationships, Reverend Gordon (who took the lead in organizing the event) was impressed enough that he has worked with the Homeless Livability Panel to come up with new ideas to grow the event for 2019, including banners, games, and strategies to grow attendance.

While each of these approaches met with success, the true assessment lies with what impact all these strategies had to affect long-term change to Central Park. To assess that change, we evaluated annual trends beginning in 2013, the first year the Corvallis Police Department utilized an Action Plan to address behaviors in the park.

The most significant, and simplest evaluation, is that there was no need to enact an Action Plan in 2018 to respond to increased illegal activities in Central Park. Since six action plans were implemented in the preceding five years, this is noteworthy.

From 2013-2017, there was an average of 350 total police responses in Central Park annually; this includes citizen- and officer-initiated events. As we implemented these strategies

in 2018, the number of total police responses dropped to 135. This represents a 61.5% reduction in total police responses from that five-year average. [Figure 5]

The Corvallis Police Department documents their actions in police reports for calls where enforcement action is taken or specific criminal activity is reported; other calls for service are simply documented in the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system. From 2013-2017, an annual average of 59 police reports were taken at Central Park. In 2018 this dropped to 37, representing a 37.1% reduction. [Figure 6]

To assess the amount of officer time spent at Central Park, the number of proactive police responses were tabulated (CAD incidents listed as ‘out’, ‘directed patrol’, or ‘action plan’). From 2013-2017 there was an annual average of 249 proactive police responses. In 2018, this number dropped to 65, representing a 73.9% reduction in proactive police responses. [Figure 7]

The primary concern of people contacting police regarding Central Park was calls affecting livability in the park, such as fights, disorderly conduct, public drinking, suspicious activity, and other disturbances or violations of law. From 2013-2017, officers responded to an average of 46 calls related to these types of livability offenses. In 2018, officers responded to 27 such offenses, a decrease of 41%. [Figure 8] Although not a focus of these efforts, specific analysis of reported criminal activity involving drugs declined from a high of 12 in 2013 to only one each in 2017 and 2018. [Figure 9]

Based on the assessment of the individual strategies to address the problem as well as the overarching comparison of police responses to Central Park before and after implementing these strategies, we conclude that involving homeless community members in the process of identifying strategies to address the chronic illegal and anti-social behavior has been successful.

Total police responses have been reduced by 61.5% including a 41% decrease in livability offenses, while proactive officer responses have dropped 73.9%.

There is no evidence to suggest the Central Park issues have simply been displaced to a different area; homeless persons still congregate in the park and livability-related complaints in the downtown area adjacent to the park have not increased. The steps undertaken to affect the changes in Central Park have had additional positive benefits not only through a less adversarial relationship with the homeless community, but also with the rest of the public and elected officials; they see the police department is taking steps to affect a change, while still holding people accountable for their actions. The Homeless Livability Panel, CARE event, and National Night Out event will continue as proven benefits to the community, but require less effort now that they are established. Ultimately, the benefit of these efforts is best summarized by an officer's observation that "It's nice to see kids playing in Central Park again."

Agency and Officer Information:

Key project team members: Sgt. Joel Goodwin, Ofc. Dale Raybould

Project contact person:

Sgt. Joel Goodwin, Community Livability Unit

Corvallis (Oregon) Police Department

180 NW 5th St

Corvallis OR 97330

(541)766-6729 ext.5007

Joel.Goodwin@corvallisoregon.gov

Appendices:

FIGURE 1:

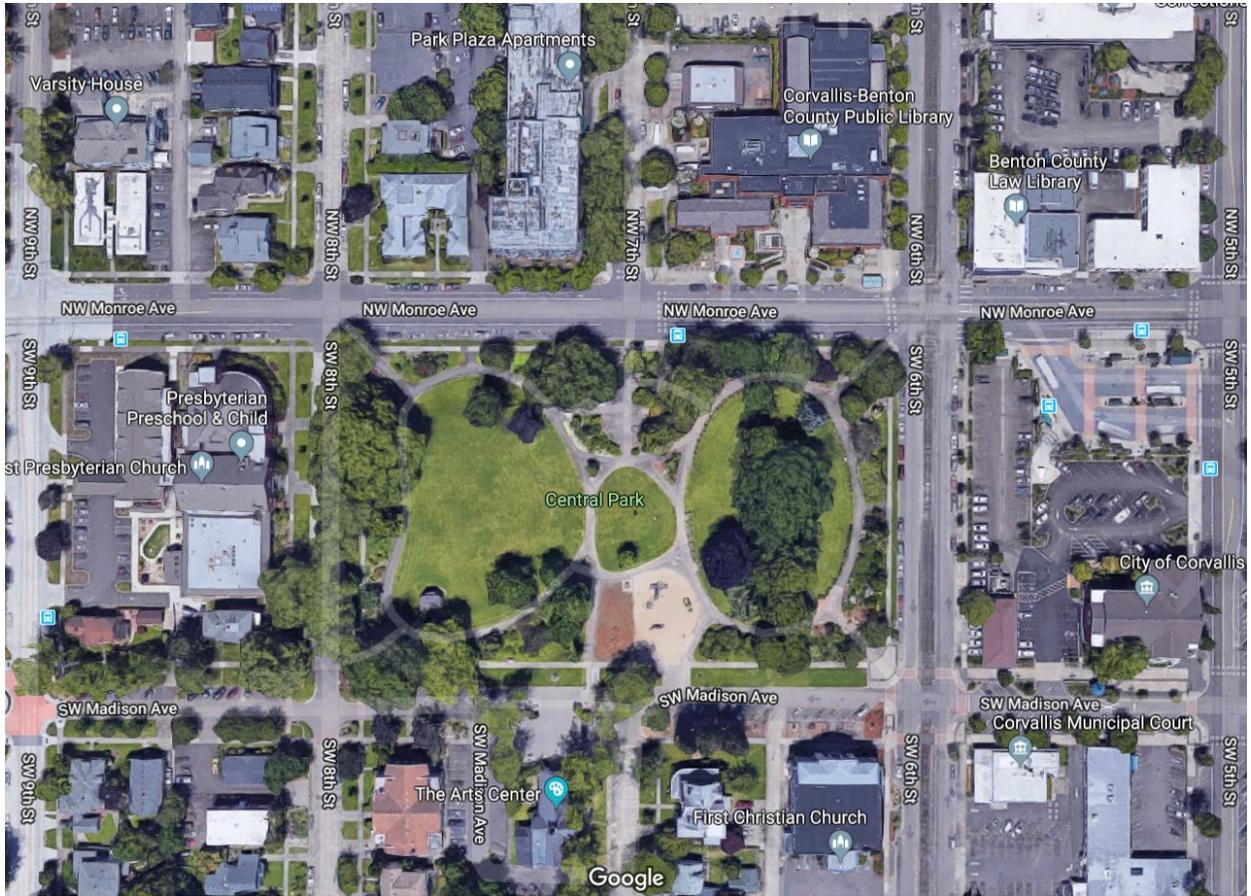


FIGURE 2:



Ward 2 Councilor Roen Hogg shot this photograph Monday morning at The Art Center Plaza adjacent to Central Park. That night Hogg criticized city officials for not doing enough about the trash, camping and other livability issues in the area.

Roan Hogg photo

FIGURE 3:



Jerry Brown gathers items for a puppy at a booth set up by Heartland Humane Society at the second annual resource fair for the homeless and others in need at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library on Tuesday.

Andy Cripe, Mid-Valley Media

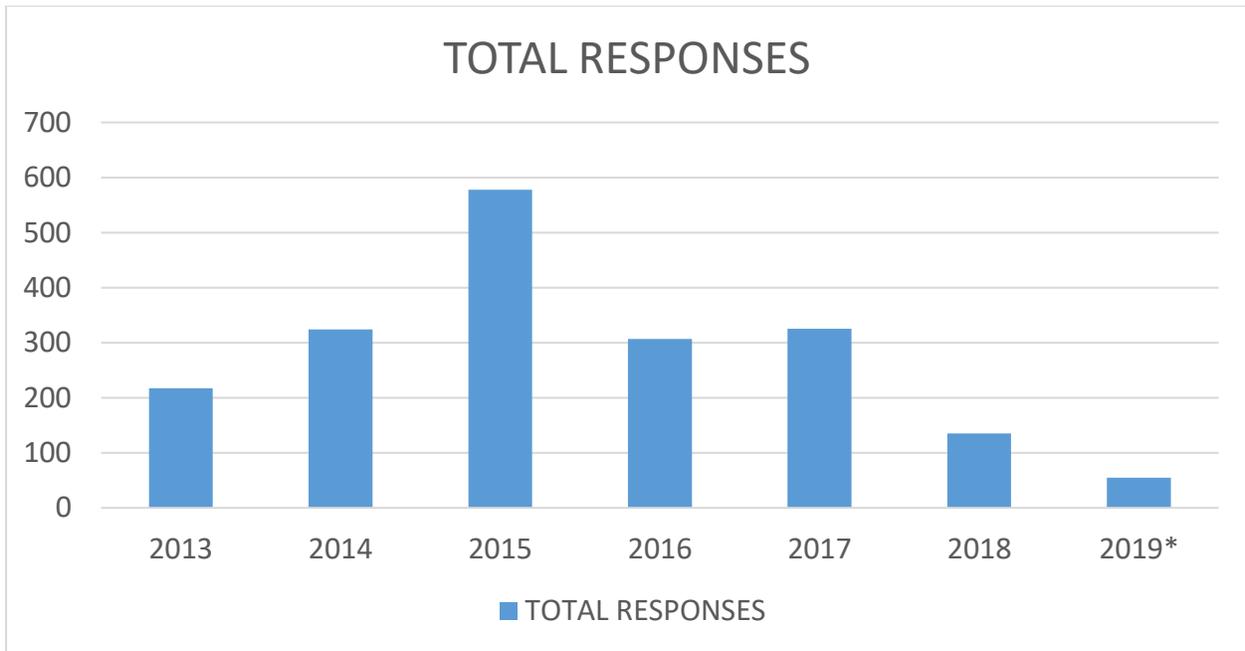
FIGURE 4:



Denise Darneal looks through the offerings at the Corvallis Area Resource Event on Tuesday morning. Held at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, CARE offers support with housing, medical and dental needs, job training, education, food, ID services, veterans services, mental health, pet assistance and more.

Andy Cripe, Gazette-Times

FIGURE 5:



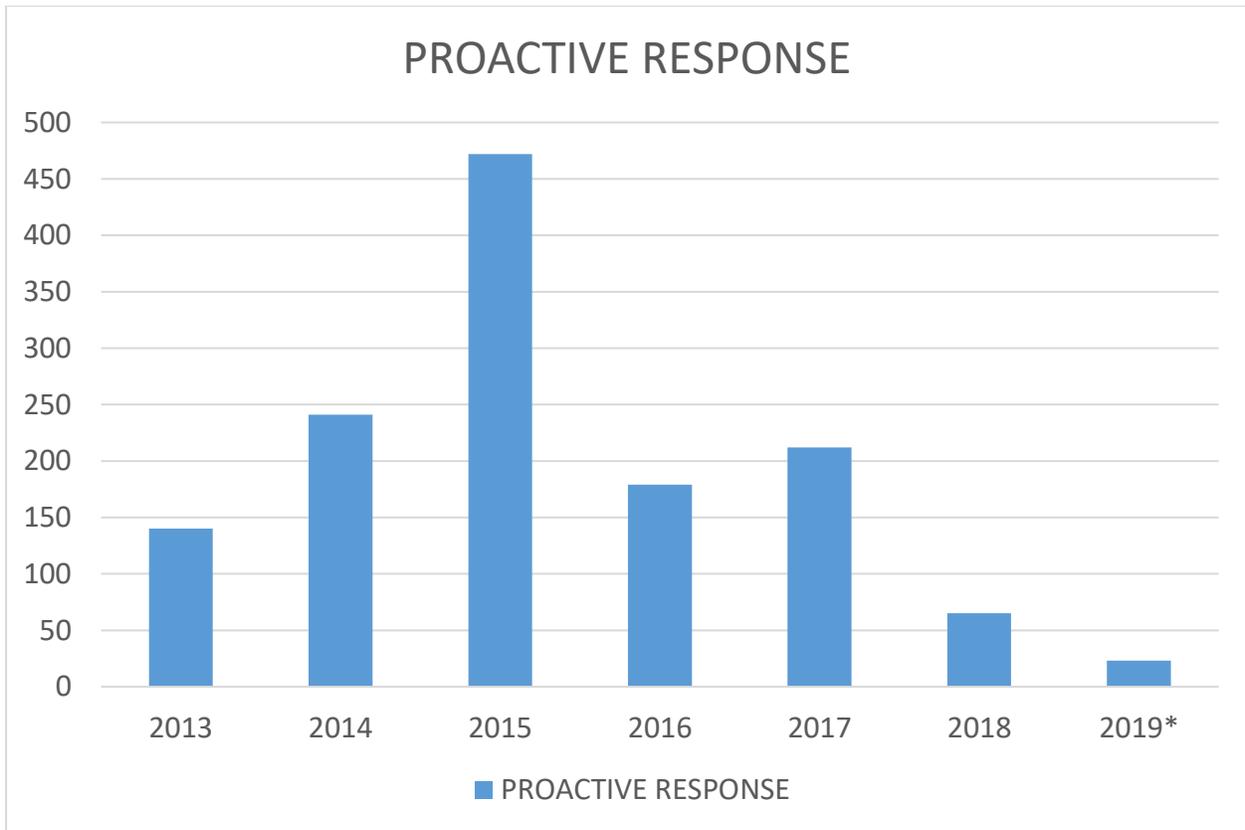
*2019 figures for 01/01/19 through 04/16/19 only

FIGURE 6:



*2019 figures for 01/01/19 through 04/16/19 only

FIGURE 7:



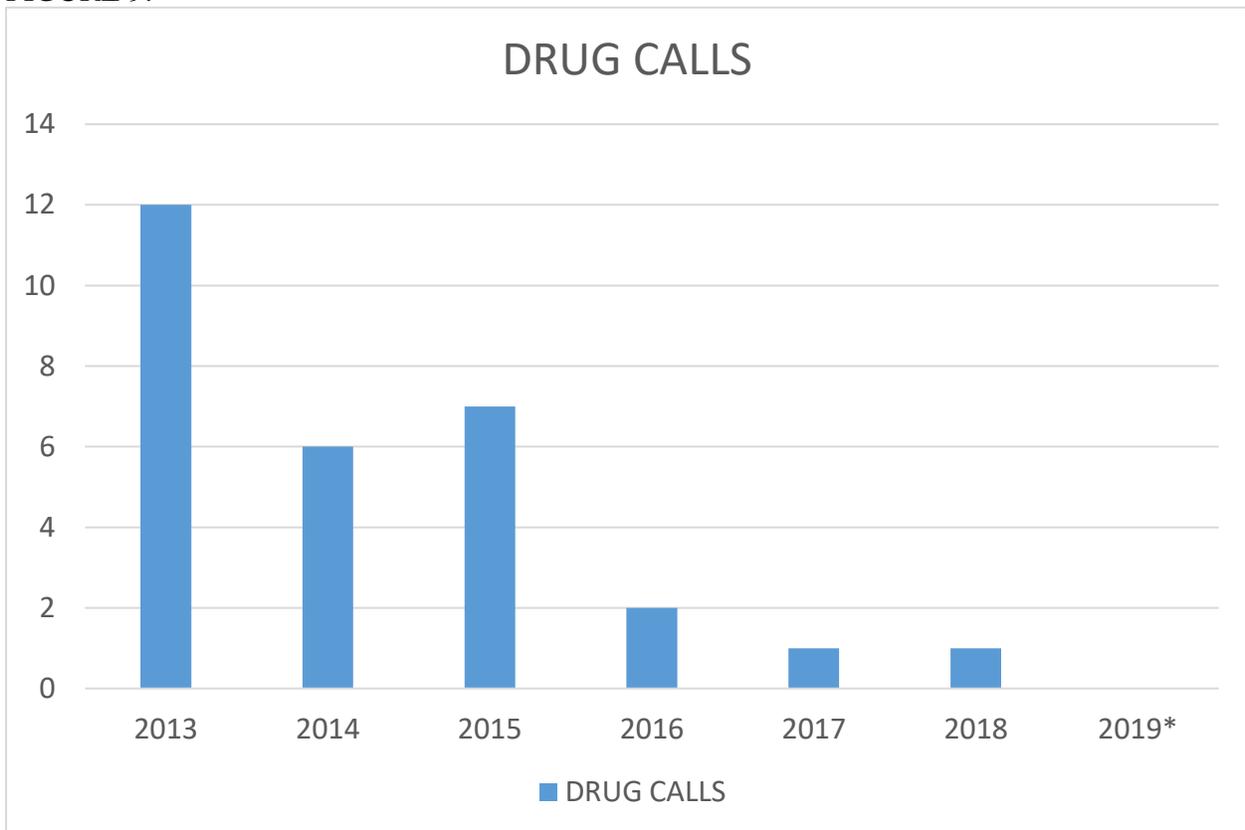
*2019 figures for 01/01/19 through 04/16/19 only

FIGURE 8:



*2019 figures for 01/01/19 through 04/16/19 only

FIGURE 9:



*2019 figures for 01/01/19 through 04/16/19 only