

Can we lead with understanding?

Hope First Roc is a bold experiment to see what will happen if we call someone other than police for help

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

What if Joe Prude had someone else to call for help the night his brother had a mental health crisis and hobbled down Jefferson Avenue in the snow, naked and confused?

Would Daniel Prude still be alive? This was the guiding question behind a new, community-led crisis response team that will launch in two city neighborhoods this fall. It became more urgent, Hope First Roc board members said, following the police killing of Akintunde Campbell last month.

Two Rochester police officers fatally shot Campbell on Ernestine Street in the 19th Ward after he pulled a gun from his sweatshirt pocket. Moments before, police attempted to stop the 38-year-old after receiving several reports of a “suspicious person” wandering around and sitting on the hood of a parked car in the neighborhood.

Campbell tried to walk away from officers. They grabbed him and a short scuffle ensued. He was dead less than a minute later.

City councilmember Stanley Martin, who helped launch the initiative and met with the man’s family after his death, said Campbell was in the throes of a mental health crisis the night he was killed. It’s unclear whether police knew that, although they later described his demeanor as “mostly nonverbal.”

Fellow board member Rafael Outland said the Campbell encounter underscored the importance of alternative crisis response teams that prioritize care and understanding over law and order. Police, he said, aren’t adequately trained to handle mental health crises.

“When I saw (the body-worn camera) tape, I saw one of the most horrific involuntary practices being demonstrated by police, which is first grabbing at somebody,” Outland said. “They were trying to grab somebody who is in a crisis situation. Now I think anybody from the service field knows that’s a lack of compassion. (It shows) we’re probably not listening to what the person is saying in that moment and, in most cases, we’re operating from our own fruition.

“There’s just a lack of logic when we think about service people showing up, reaching out and grabbing for people, and then expecting something positive to happen.”

Hope First Roc, he said, is a bold experiment to see what will happen if we call someone other than police for help.

Non-police crisis response pilot launches in Rochester: How will it work?

The program emerged from a state task force designed to evaluate different crisis response models and compile recommendations for best practices following Prude’s death in 2020.

The Daniel's Law Task Force called on cities to develop a team of mental health professionals to respond to calls involving a crisis, behavioral wellness check or substance use issue. Police should not respond unless there is a threat of violence, the task force said.

Rochester already has a crisis response team in place, but it relies on 911 dispatchers to determine whether a call for help is appropriate for emergency response social workers, police, or both. The Person in Crisis team is city-run and has responded to just over 2,000 calls for help so far this year. Police were dispatched to nearly half of those calls, according to city data; seven people have been arrested.

Hope First Roc will operate entirely independent from the city and police, Martin said. "We want to make sure that people know ... there's no connection between the work we're doing and the risk of incarceration or even death when people are in crisis," she said.

To start, the team will serve the 19th Ward and Genesee-Jefferson neighborhoods between 3 p.m. and 11 p.m. Eventually, they hope to expand to a 24/7, citywide effort.

People in need of help for themselves, neighbors or loved ones can call Hope First Roc directly – not 911 or 211 – for nonviolent situations including interpersonal disputes, mental health crises including self-harm or suicidal ideations, or concerns about drug use.

They'll meet a team of trained professionals who can relate: The grassroots organization has put a strong focus on hiring individuals who have dealt with addiction, incarcer-

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BASED ON ROCHESTER POLICE DEPARTMENT FOOTAGE OF 2020 DANIEL PRUDE INCIDENT.

RIGHT: Free the People Roc and supporters protested the grand jury's decision not to indict the Rochester police officers involved in Daniel Prude's death on Feb. 23, 2021. While Ashley Gantt, speaks, Breyana Clark talks to Stanley Martin and gives her a hug. All three are organizers with Free the People Roc.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

BELOW: Stanley Martin of Free The People ROC, speaks with the media in front of City Hall during a September 2020 press conference about the death of Daniel Prude during an arrest by Rochester police.

JAMIE GERMANO/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BASED ON POLICE BODY CAMERA FOOTAGE TAKEN WHEN AKINTUNDE CAMPBELL WAS SHOT AND KILLED ON JULY 31 IN ROCHESTER.

Hope First Roc

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ation or mental health challenges themselves. "We believe it allows for more compassion and empathy when you kind of already know what someone else may be going through, because you've gone through it and overcome it yourself," Martin said.

Staff will receive 500 hours of cross-cultural, bias and de-escalation training based on best practices from existing community response models in Oregon and Denver. (Rochester police, by comparison, receive 24 hours of crisis response training in the police academy and can choose whether to sit through an additional 40-hour training offered twice a year.)

Hope First Roc's goal is to keep people safe, whether that is through hospital referrals, on-the-spot crisis counseling, temporary relocation assistance or simply help picking up a prescription.

And if the person in question declines that help, the community responders will walk away. Autonomy is another cornerstone of what separates them from other city or police-involved models.

"Being the midst of a mental health crisis or a substance use crisis is not and should never be a crime, and so it should not be responded to with criminalizing or violent infrastructure," said Mallory Szymanski, another board member.

Hope First Roc: Community safety starts with community outreach

Akintunde Campbell did walk away from those called to a 19th Ward neighborhood for help.

And, unbeknownst to the caller, he had a gun. What about the safety of others in the neighborhood? Martin said this community-focused model relies on building relationships before a crisis occurs. Hope First Roc members will spend the first few weeks canvassing neighborhoods to get to know the people who live there and explain how they operate.

In this case, they might have started their outreach by talking with the neighbor who called to report Campbell as suspicious. What were they afraid of? What would a safe solution look like to them?

If Campbell walked away from them, like he did police, they might have already known that his mother lived just a few doors down, Martin said. Maybe she could have helped usher him inside.

She said many residents on Ernestine Street were familiar with Campbell and knew he had a history of mental health challenges.

It is unclear whether the person who called 911 knew or shared that background with police before they arrived.

The Hope First Roc board members said their biggest challenge will be helping others imagine a world where calling police is not the only option. "We're going back to how community existed prior to ... essentially being occupied by police," Martin said. "Neighbors took care of each other."

Szymanski lives in the 19th Ward herself, a neighborhood she describes as deeply community oriented. She said the 911 call was a cry for help that ended in tragedy.

But she believes it didn't have to. "The neighbors clearly cared about their neighborhood, were paying attention to what was going on in the street ... and wanted support," she said. "I can only imagine how they must feel now that their call was part of the story of Mr. Campbell's death. I don't want that for anyone. I want neighbors to be able to trust that whoever they call is going to show up and support the person in crisis, as well as the community to ensure that everybody leaves that situation safer, better, more whole."

– Kayla Canne covers community safety for the Democrat and Chronicle with a focus on police

accountability, government surveillance and how people are impacted by violence. Follow her on Twitter @kaylacanne and @bykaylacanne on Instagram. Get in touch at kcanne@gannett.com.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BASED ON A BLACK LIVES MATTER EVENT CALLING FOR JUSTICE IN THE DEATH OF DANIEL PRUDE. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

RIGHT: Rochester police were called to City Hall because protesters were not allowing employees into the building early Sept. 16, 2020. The protesters said they would not move until the officers involved in the death of Daniel Prude were fired and arrested. Stanley Martin puts her hands in the air as she expects to be arrested for not moving.

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