

The Register-Guard

Eugene police's new Street Crimes Unit hits the streets, shuts down problem house

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Eugene Police Department's new Street Crimes Unit has made its first case in a residential neighborhood in northeast Eugene.

Officers served an abatement Tuesday on a home that's been labeled a "problem house" on Willona Drive, just west of the Costco near Coburg Road. Two people were arrested on warrants, making that at least 13 people arrested at that address this year.

An abatement allows police to use building codes, fire codes, zoning and more to improve the quality of life and resolve life safety issues within neighborhoods. For the Willona Drive house, the Eugene police Street Crimes Unit shut down the home for health, safety and fire reasons, in partnership with the city of Eugene's code enforcement department, Northwest Hazmat and the Lane County parole and probation department.

It was one of many busts Eugene police hope to make through the Street Crimes Unit — currently made up of four patrol officers, a lieutenant and a sergeant — as part of the city of Eugene's \$8.6 million bridge funding project.

The bridge funding, awarded in December 2018, will be provided for 18 months and includes funding 10 new officers to create the citywide Street Crimes Unit. It also funds five community service officers, four staff members at the 911 call center and five additional jail beds. Additional funding provides coverage for ambulance transportation and municipal court and city prosecutor services to meet growing needs.

"To say that I am excited about our Street Crimes Unit is an understatement," Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner said Wednesday. "These are some of our most highly motivated and skilled staff, and they are passionate about this new

mission. They are going to make a dynamic difference in a variety of public safety issues including on emerging crimes and neighborhood livability issues.”

The bridge funding also will support a year-round safe sleeping program for the homeless, a daytime resource center for storage, bathrooms and services, and on-going support for programs like the car camping program, the rest stop program and the Lindholm Center.

Preventative services also are supported by bridge funding, including youth mental health services, the 15th Night program, community court program and the community outreach response team, in coordination with the White Bird Clinic.

The Street Crimes Unit will focus on prolific offenders, Skinner said, who are identified through intelligence-based policing, public tips and other sources. The officers will proactively respond across the city to quality of life issues as they arise, using all available resources and partners such as community groups, neighborhood associations and city services.

While only staffed by six members currently, the Street Crimes Unit will expand to include another sergeant and four additional officers as staffing allows, Skinner said.

Skinner described the Willona Drive home as having “years and years and years” of problems in the neighborhood, with neighbors reporting the house 93 times since 2010, 46 calls in 2018 alone. But with a shortage of resources, the problem hadn’t been sufficiently dealt with — until now.

“It’s not unique to this neighborhood. We have these types of houses all over this community that we need to address but because our resources are so scarce, we just don’t have the time to be able to do that,” he said.

The team is expected to address street crimes, including drugs and burglaries, while not having to respond to calls for service like officers on patrol.

Skinner said he is excited to say the unit is already making a difference in its first week on the job. He also said he was excited for the future of Eugene police, with 12 new officers in the police academy right now and job offers expected for 15 to 17 more officers next month.

“We’re growing into the thing that we should be as a full-service, 21st century police department,” he said.