

Fairbanks' Community Service Patrol might take on broader duties on inebriates

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FAIRBANKS – The downtown Fairbanks-based Community Service Patrol may play a role in a citywide effort to get seriously intoxicated people off the streets this year.

Putting inebriates in protective custody is a legal responsibility of the city but a time-consuming job that has bounced between the city fire department and police department in the last year.

Recently, the City Council has shown support for a third organization, the Community Service Patrol. The organization now responds to calls about inebriates in a handful of downtown blocks but is being discussed as a citywide model.

The Community Service Patrol is made up of security company Securitas employees who work under a contract with the nonprofit Downtown Association of Fairbanks.

The program has earned praise from Fairbanks Police Chief Laren Zager for doing work that would otherwise occupy three full-time

police officers. The program transports 1,200 to 1,400 people to the jail, hospital or another safe location each year.

It's also cheaper than police service. Community Service Patrol employees, who are known as ambassadors, make a fraction of the salary of police officers.

The program has limitations. It's financed by a patchwork of private donations and local tax revenue and it's limited to a handful of blocks around Cushman Street. CSP is paid for with about \$140,000 in private donations and about \$50,000 in city hotel tax money.

In December, the City Council addressed the funding by allocating an additional \$75,000 to the program, although the funding is contingent on another government also supporting the patrol. This month, the Fairbanks North Star Borough is scheduled to consider helping the city by paying \$25,000 to the CSP. Money for the CSP also was the top priority item on the city's wish list from the Legislature this year.

City mayor John Eberhart, who proposed the increased funding, said if the other funding materializes, he'd like to see the CSP or a similar service work more hours and grow to serve inebriates outside the downtown region. The city might work with the Downtown Association if it was interested or create a larger CSP-type force directly, he said.

“At the moment, you're tying up a terrific amount of police time, in particular, and firefighter time as well and your ambulance to deal with these people,” he said. “We want to relieve police and

firefighters of having to handle as many of these calls by having the Community Service Patrol handle it. They (CSP) do a good job ... but they're not really responding to outside their small area.”

Although chronic inebriates are most associated with the downtown Fairbanks area, incapacitated people calls also cluster around the big retail stores and major thoroughfare streets, according to a 2013 map of incapacitated people calls created by Fairbanks 911 call center Director Stephanie Johnson.

An improved, expanded patrol would focus on the hot spots identified by dispatch and would work 16 hours from 11 a.m. to 3 a.m., the busiest time for calls for incapacitated people, Eberhart said.

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