

# “Street medics” provide emergency care to US protesters injured by police

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At protests that have erupted in the aftermath of the brutal murder of George Floyd, demonstrators who have suffered injuries and abuse at the hands of violent police officers have been administered to by thousands of medical professionals and lay people who have served as volunteers to aid and heal demonstrators.

These volunteers, known on the protests as “street medics,” have included health care workers engaged in direct medical treatment—nursing students, doctors and trauma surgeons—as well as an amalgam of workers from other occupations, such as security guards, ski patrollers and even wilderness EMTs. Some of the main duties for “street medics” have involved helping protesters cope with the effects of teargas and pepper spray, broken limbs, and injuries from “less-lethal” rounds of rubber bullets and bean-bag hits.

“Street medics” is an umbrella term for volunteer medical organizations that assist local residents during protests movements or other situations where they are threatened with violence by the police. They have gained special notoriety in recent weeks in several cities in the US that have been scenes of large demonstrations with heavy battles against police forces, including Denver, Colorado; Atlanta, Georgia; Brooklyn, New York; San Francisco and Oakland, California; and Asheville, North Carolina.

While these organizations are not usually financed and run by private companies, they have tended to operate on a highly systematic basis, setting up transportation networks to reach to and from areas where protesters are present. Some of their more typical equipment include arm coverings, helmets and backpacks. Many first-aid responders have stayed in areas where protesters are marching, from day to night and past curfew times established by state governors to quell social opposition.

In the majority of marches that have led to clashes with law enforcement, medics have been drawn in to help give first aid to injuries caused by severe brutality from the police. In Denver, members of the volunteer medical organization known as the Denver Action Medical Committee reported to a local news outlet that they responded to major head, face and eye injuries sustained by protesters.

Many of these injuries came from painful rubber and plastic bullet shots, which are euphemistically termed as “non-lethal” weapons and are not designed to be shot directly at people, especially around the upper neck.

After a protest several weeks ago, a federal judge was forced to issue a temporary injunction to stop Denver police from employing teargas and other “less-than-lethal” weapons after a class-action lawsuit was filed by one street medic who was shot multiple times by police with pepper balls while attending to patients.

The most substantial number of “street medics” reside in the California Bay Area, where an organization called the Do No Harm Coalition runs one of the largest street medic training centers in the country. One of the co-founders of the coalition, Dr. Rupa Marya, described the organization in an NPR article as “450 health workers committed to structural change.” She told the *Mercury News*, “When we see suffering, that’s where we go.”

Since the murder of Floyd on May 25, the number of volunteer medics has soared across the country. More than 5,600 medical professionals registered for the coalition’s “street medicine” online training and were given instructions on how to respond to police and trained on tactics and treatments in high-risk situations.

Police have made concerted efforts to not only target, harass and in many cases harm peaceful demonstrators

but also display acts of aggression against the street medics themselves, targeting them with the same level of brutality they've used against protesters. In Asheville earlier this month, local police armed with anti-riot gear barged into a triage station where a group of medics had assembled in a line across a street.

One of the volunteers told a reporter for Human Rights Watch that they were standing with their hands over their heads telling police they were medics. Police ignored their remarks and according to the volunteer "grabbed us by the shoulders, shoved us down the street, and told us to leave if we don't want to be arrested." Police then reportedly destroyed \$700 worth of medical supplies at their station.

Medics have frequently found themselves in the crosshairs of dangerous confrontations initiated by the police forces. At a protest in Austin, Texas, last month, police fired impact projectiles at a group of protesters and severely injured a Texas State University student in the head. The student, Justin Howell, immediately dropped to the ground and was found with blood leaking all over his body. Witnesses at the scene assumed the young student had died from the attack.

Afterward, police told protesters and street medic teams to send the student over to their headquarters for medical attention. Police who were guarding the headquarters, however, decided to fire "less-lethal" weapons at the crowd 14 times and hit one street medic with a projectile, injuring his hand. Howell ended up suffering brain damage that could have been avoided had he received medical treatment earlier.

Police and law enforcement officials have falsely justified the use of such weapons on the grounds that they are mild instruments used to suppress demonstrators. The use of such weapons has resulted in countless peaceful protesters and innocent bystanders enduring permanent and sometimes even fatal injuries. One protester, Aubreana Inda, who participated in a Seattle protest earlier this month was shot in the chest with a flash grenade, had gone into a cardiac arrest three times from the impact, and would not have survived had there not been street medics on the scene to provide assistance.

The interventions of volunteer health care workers and others from a wide range of industries point to the immense linkage between protests against police repression and the conscious identification and

solidarity large sections of the working-class feel toward victims of the capitalist state. Medical professionals, in particular, who have been battling the coronavirus pandemic, feel a parallel responsibility in aiding workers victimized by an army of police departments.



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