



League of Women Voters of Portland

PO Box 3491, Portland, Oregon 97208-3491

503-228-1675 • info@lwvpdx.org • www.lwvpdx.org

Board of Directors

October 20, 2021

Debbie Kaye
President

To: Mayor Ted Wheeler
Commissioners Hardesty, Mapps, Rubio, and Ryan

Marion McNamara
1st VP

Chris Cobey
2nd VP

From: League of Women Voters of Portland
Debbie Kaye, president
James Ofsink, chair, LWV Justice Interest Group

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Mayor Wheeler and Commissioners Hardesty, Mapps, Rubio, and Ryan:

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The League of Women Voters of Portland strongly supports expansion of the Portland Street Response (PSR) program. We understand that City Council will vote on increased funding in November.

Debbie Aiona

Carolyn Buppert

Judy Froemke

The League was impressed with the quality of the thorough [evaluation](#) of the PSR by Portland State University covering the first six months of the program's operation. We agree with their recommendation that the PSR be expanded citywide. The report identified PSR's strengths, including a staff skilled in communicating with individuals in distress, the capacity to spend time with each person to address their specific needs, and coordination with other departments and agencies for follow-up services.

Linda Mantel

Amber Nobe

Margaret Noel

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deCoursey

Off Board Leaders

Jen Jacobs
Budget

While progress was made during the first six months, challenges remain. For example, there is a lack of awareness of the new program, and the 911 and 311 call services are understaffed. Additionally, PSR is only able to respond to calls requesting help in public places, and they are limited to non-emergency calls.

Ann Dudley
Nominating

Mary McWilliams
Membership

Philip Thor
Endowment Fund

On the other hand, many of the police officers who have worked with the PSR team are positive about the program's value. Based on the PSU report, we believe that expanding the services PSR provides will not only benefit the community, but also help reduce the number of calls the police must handle for issues that don't require an armed officer. If PSR is expanded as the PSU report recommends, the City Council, the Portland Fire Bureau, and PPB leadership should give thoughtful attention to the following issues raised in that report:

- Increase the capacity of 911 and 311 services so they are able to handle the call volume without delay.
- Expand the types of calls to which PSR is authorized to respond, including those inside homes or in homeless shelters, and those responding to suicide threats and some other serious issues.

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To promote political responsibility through informed and active participation in government.

- Draft protocols that describe how PSR staff respond to PPB officers' requests for assistance. PSR and PPB can work together for mutual benefit. PSR members should use their expertise interacting with persons experiencing a mental health crisis, while at the same time PPB officers assure everyone's safety.
- Implement thorough screening and hiring processes so that new PSR employees have the same level of expertise communicating with target audiences as the first team.
- Structure the expansion so that new teams are not overloaded. If outreach workers are rushed and exhausted, the capacity for quality problem solving could be limited.
- Provide the supervision, training, and support that workers need to continue to be effective and avoid burnout.
- Allocate resources effectively so that funding matches the expanded responsibilities. This may require phasing in coverage to some areas of the city.

The Portland Street Response is not the entire solution to PPB staffing issues, but it does offer a powerful tool for lifting some of the burden off police. As the PSU report demonstrates, it further provides a more effective approach to mental health crisis calls that officers have neither the time nor the capacity to manage. It also has the added benefit of connecting people to appropriate community services that address their needs.

Portland has an opportunity to model for the nation a new path of crisis intervention, fostering collaboration between police officers and other skilled professionals, while compassionately meeting human needs on the ground.

We wish you well as you undertake the difficult but important task of planning for citywide expansion of this promising program.

Sincerely,

League of Women Voters of Portland

Debbie Kaye, president



James Ofsink, chair, Justice Interest Group

