



League of Women Voters of Portland

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Dear Mayor Wheeler, Commissioners Gonzalez, Mapps, Rubio, and Ryan:

RE: Changes to Portland Street Response

The League of Women Voters of Portland has been engaged in issues related to policing and police oversight since the 1980s. During our decades-long attention to community safety, we have supported the use of specialists from outside the Bureau, training for responders in “human relations,” and the assignment of personnel based on their sensitivity to community needs. As part of the League’s research into our 2021 *Portland Police Bureau: Oversight and Accountability report*, we looked closely at the fledgling Portland Street Response program (PSR). Because of our research and resulting advocacy position, we support PSR’s model of responding to appropriate calls for service with unarmed specialists who emphasize de-escalation. We are writing now to express our concerns that recent changes to the PSR program will diminish its effectiveness.

Following our 2021 research report and through extended dialog, LWVPDX members adopted a position which included the idea that:

The city and PPB should invest in programs that assign some duties currently held by bureau members to unarmed, appropriately trained civilian employees. For example, non-sworn personnel with suitable experience and proper preparation can handle administrative tasks or interactions with people in crisis, with mental health issues, or urban camping complaints effectively.

Since the program’s early days, LWVPDX has watched PSR’s successes and missteps; we therefore understand the program to have been generally working well. We have observed that the program often elicited praise from many stakeholders, including members of the City Council, unhoused community members, first responders in the fire and police bureaus, and the media. The Portland Street Response: Year Two Mid-Point Evaluation by Portland State University (PSU) assessment of the program gave PSR high marks saying:

Portland Street Response continues to demonstrate success in meeting its outcome goals of reducing police and fire response to non-emergency calls and calls involving people experiencing mental health or behavioral health crises.

Given that the program seems to have been working well, we are concerned about recent policy changes reported in the media, which could jeopardize some of that progress. Specifically, no longer allowing PSR to provide basic survival necessities such as food and temporary shelter to people in crisis removes strategies that internal and external reviewers have found to be effective. The PSU evaluation includes examples of PSR de-escalating situations for people in crisis by meeting their immediate basic needs and one PSR worker described it as a best practice.

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

Furthermore, we are very concerned about the April 11 policy change to include PSR in the city's sweeps of homeless encampments in spite of staff concerns and objections described in a joint statement from some members of PSR¹. This policy change is potentially damaging to PSR's credibility and trust-building efforts when they interact with unhoused community members. To date, PSR has worked to maintain its separation from enforcement aspects of the city's response to homelessness. It is understandable that unhoused community members would have less trust in those involved in the city's sweeps. The most recent PSU evaluation concluded:

[Requiring PSR to participate in sweeps] is antithetical to the program's core mission and thwarts their efforts to build trust among people in crisis. Some staff worried that this was contributing to misinformation among unhoused people and may reduce the likelihood that they will reach out for PSR's support if they need it.

In addition, the League has concerns about the process the city used for this major change to the program's operations and was surprised to learn about these policy shifts from local media reporting of Commissioner Gonzalez's press release. In light of the significant nature of these decisions, the magnitude of community concern, and the anticipated impact on the people PSR serves, the public should have been given the opportunity to provide its feedback before the policies were changed.

We call on the city to revisit recent policy changes that threaten the program's successes and to engage stakeholders, PSR, and the community transparently before making significant alterations to the program's established practices. Specifically, we call on the city leadership to fully support a successful and sustainable PSR that follows best practices established by independent experts, including:

- Allowing PSR to supply those in crisis with basic living requirements.
- Not requiring PSR staff to participate in sweeps of camps for unhoused Portlanders.
- Fully funding an independent PSR that has the staffing and capacity to serve calls citywide and 24/7.

The League continues to believe that the Portland Street Response is one of our city's most effective and promising solutions for addressing the large segment of calls for service (911 or non-emergency number) that result from behavioral or mental health crises. PSR is a bright spot in Portland. Let's strengthen PSR and let it continue its track record of success.

Sincerely,



Carolyn Buppert, president
League of Women Voters of Portland



James Ofsink, chair
Justice Interest Group

¹ <https://www.protect17.org/2023/03/15/protect17-members-at-portland-street-response-condemn-no-tent-policy/>