

Portland alternative police response yields social services, no arrests in first year

April 27 2022, by Stefanie Knowlton



Credit: Portland State University

Portland Street Response (PSR), the city's new first-response unit, responded to 903 calls in its first year, which resulted in 405 service referrals including nine housing placements and zero arrests, according to an evaluation by PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative presented to Portland City Council Tuesday.

The program also demonstrated success in meeting outcome goals set by the city to reduce the number of calls typically responded to by police as well as reducing the number of behavioral health and non-emergency calls responded to by police and fire and reducing the number of non-life threatening 911 calls that are transported to the ER.

Key findings (All from PSR's service area and during hours of operation):

- 4% reduction in total calls traditionally responded to by police.
- 27% reduction in police response on non-emergency welfare checks and dispatches coded as "unwanted persons" calls.
- 12.4% reduction in fire department activity on behavioral health calls and illegal burn calls.
- Only 29 clients (3.2% of all calls) required transport to hospital. Most treated on scene.
- PSR clients rated PSR 5 on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the best.

The PSR team made 144 referrals during the initial contact, and the team's community health workers and peer support specialists made another 261 referrals in 437 follow-up visits with clients for everything from housing and financial benefits to medical treatment and pet care. The team also helped nine people find permanent housing.

In surveys conducted in collaboration with the Street Roots Ambassador Program, people experiencing homelessness described the care they received from PSR: "I was able to survive another day because I didn't have a tent or food before them"; "They provided resources and helped me get a hot shower"; "They were friendly, treated me like a human being."

"Portland Street Response has come so far in a very short amount of time—from a small pilot program in one neighborhood to a citywide

movement that has fundamentally changed Portland's first response system. Portland Street Response provides a model for the nation to follow, and we look forward to continuing to monitor its progress and impact as it expands citywide," said Dr. Greg Townley, co-founder of PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative and the lead evaluator.

The evaluation also included recommendations to further increase the program's effectiveness: continue to expand the program across the city 24/7; provide staffing levels that allow sufficient time with clients; refine [community outreach](#)/education to include more of the unhoused community and continue to advance racial equity.

"We thank Portland State University's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative for its thorough evaluation of Portland Street Response at the one-year mark. Having an expert and independent evaluation of the program is a key component of making sure we get it right. We take this feedback seriously and will use it as a guide going forward," said Community Health Division Chief Tim Matthews.

Portland launched PSR in the Lents neighborhood on Feb. 16, 2021, as a new first response for non-[emergency calls](#) involving people experiencing homelessness and/or mental health crises. It expanded to cover the entire Portland Police Bureau (PPB) East Precinct on Nov. 4, 2021. The initial team consisted of a firefighter paramedic, a licensed mental health crisis responder and two community health workers, with a second team added in November consisting of a firefighter EMT, a mental health crisis responder and two peer support specialists.

Portland Fire & Rescue contracted with the Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative to conduct an evaluation to examine overall program effectiveness, provide suggestions for refinement and provide recommendations for scaling up citywide.

"Since day one, Portland Street Response has led with values centering accountability, transparency, and adaptation guided by our pilot evaluations. I'm incredibly thankful for the work of PSU's Homeless Research & Action Collaborative, which shows Portland Street Response is ready to move beyond the pilot phase as a permanent solution for non-violent 911 calls relating to those experiencing a mental or behavioral [health](#) crisis," said Portland Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty.

More information: Portland Street Response: Year One Evaluation. www.pdx.edu/homelessness/sites...1/files/2022-04/HRAC%20Portland%20Street%20Response%20One-Year%20Evaluation_for%20public%20release.pdf

Provided by Portland State University

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