



Believe our stories & listen

Portland Street Response survey report conducted with
and for unhoused people

A collaboration of the Portland Street Response Community Outreach workgroup and



Yellow
Brick Road



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Portland Street Response survey report Sept. 19,
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Cover Photo Credit: Katalina Berbari. Pictured: Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer and Mode

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This work was done in collaboration with Mapping Action Collective, Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, Right 2 Survive, Sisters of the Road, Street Books, Street Roots and Yellow Brick Road.

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“I would like to see street response be the city’s first response in dealing with the homeless crisis. I want street response to be the city’s compassion.” – survey respondent

Introduction

Many advocates, local officials, and people experiencing homelessness agree that the city needs a better way to respond to low-priority calls for service involving those experiencing homelessness and behavioral health crises.

Costly police resources are ineffectively dispatched to handle these types of calls. Last year, the [Oregonian reported](#) that 52% of all arrests in 2017 were of people identified as homeless. [Willamette Week's report](#) on the city's 911 dispatch center showed that Portland residents call 911 to complain of an “unwanted person” more than any other reason. [Disability Rights Oregon showed](#) that 72% of arrests at area hospitals targeted unhoused people between 2017 and 2018.

“As long as we deal with homelessness with a police response, people’s lives will be needlessly entangled in the legal system.”

– Street Roots

This past March, [Street Roots called for a new model of response](#) to calls involving unhoused community members as well as people experiencing behavioral health crises in public. Street Roots reporter Emily Green outlined a plan, the Portland Street Response, and then Street Roots launched an [advocacy effort to push for the plan](#). Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty was working on a related effort which her office then began referring to as the Portland Street Response (PSR).

The mission of PSR is to send the right resource and response to the right person at the right time. The vision is a system that appropriately responds to the high number of “unwanted persons” or welfare check calls and frees up police resources to focus on preventing and solving crimes.

The Portland City Council allotted \$500,000 toward developing the Portland Street Response pilot in July. Commissioner Hardesty’s staff, in collaboration with Mayor Ted Wheeler’s staff, are charged with bringing a plan to City Council this November.

Several work groups focused on call transitioning, internal logistics, external logistics, and community engagement were formed to help develop this plan. This report presents the methods, findings and recommendations from a collaborative survey process conducted by the community engagement work group and several partnering organizations aimed at ensuring that the voices of individuals experiencing homelessness are at the forefront of conversations informing PSR.



Street Roots vendors and staff brought signs to the April 1 City of Portland budget forum at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization.

Executive Summary

A team of community partners spread out across the city July 16 and 18 to interview people experiencing homelessness to help inform the design of the Portland Street Response pilot project (PSR). An additional team went out on Sept. 6.

Members of Street Roots, Sisters of the Road, Right 2 Survive, Street Books, the Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, the Mapping Action Collective, Yellow Brick Road, Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty's office, and Alissa Keny-Guyer's office interviewed 184 unhoused people. Participants formed teams of two to three, each lead by a Street Roots vendor or someone else who had experienced homelessness.

Teams engaged people experiencing homelessness in discussions about what the PSR pilot should look like, including who the first responders should be, how they should approach individuals in crisis, what types of services and resources they should bring with them, and what types of training they should have. Following the interviews, responses were analyzed and summarized into this report to provide guidance for this important initiative based directly on the needs and experiences of unhoused people.

Survey respondents had powerful examples of both positive and negative interactions with first responders ranging from "horrible, embarrassing, degrading" to "compassionate, supportive."

A thread that weaves through all the responses in the survey is a call to be treated humanely. For example, regardless of whether respondents answered that their experiences with first responders were positive or negative, many experienced being treated rudely rather than with politeness and respect.

While many respondents stated that police should not be present for any responses, others wanted police presence when it made the most sense: theft, robbery, harassment, violent crimes, danger to a child, rape, and domestic violence. Most preferred non-police responses for calls about camping, sleeping, drug overdoses, and mental health crises.

If not police, then who? The most common response was "mental health professionals." Numerous respondents also noted the importance of social workers for referring people to housing and health services; peer support specialists and/or people with lived experience; and, to a lesser extent, EMTs and firefighters.

These responders should make the unhoused community feel safe through a variety of measures. The top suggestions: an assurance to not run checks for outstanding warrants, to not bring weapons and to bring food and water.

Helpful supplies to bring while responding included hygiene products, backpacks or bags

for people's belongings, and first aid/medical care supplies. Respondents also discussed the importance of getting connected to or referrals to housing and health services, with transportation to services being the second-most commonly reported need.

“Mental health awareness” was the most common answer when people were asked what training first responders should have. Respondents also noted here and elsewhere how important it is for responders to have good listening skills, and not to make assumptions about what the person needs.

The people surveyed were overwhelmingly positive, supportive, and excited about the Portland Street Response. Numerous individuals emphasized the importance of respecting human dignity and treating people who are unhoused as human beings with a variety of complex life circumstances and needs.

Some of the most illuminating information from the survey comes from reading the experiences of those living unhoused, in their own words. It shows how critical it is to find the right response to the right situation at the right time.

***“When you already feel hopeless, and you’re at the end of your road, and you’re ready to jump or hang yourself, no one wants to be labeled or called an ‘unwanted person.’”
– survey respondent***