

A report prepared for the City of Portland
Bureau of Fire & Rescue

Portland Street Response: Year Two Program Evaluation

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Research Team and Acknowledgements

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Cover: A fleet of Portland Street Response vans. (Photo courtesy of the City of Portland).

Executive Summary

Introduction

Overview of the Program

Portland Street Response (PSR), a program within Portland Fire & Rescue (PF&R), assists people experiencing mental health and behavioral health crises. The program operates daily from 8 AM to 10 PM and responds to calls throughout the city of Portland. The team consists of mental health crisis responders, community health medics/ EMTS, community health workers, and peer support specialists. PSR is dispatched from the Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC) when a caller reports one or more of the following *and* the individual has no known access to weapons and is not displaying physically combative or threatening behavior:

1. A person who is possibly experiencing a mental health crisis, intoxicated, and/or drug affected. This person is either outside or inside of a publicly accessible space such as a business, store, or public lobby
2. A person who is outside and down, not checked
3. A person who is outside and yelling
4. A person who needs a referral for services but does not have access to a phone

Overview of the Evaluation

PF&R contracted with the Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative to conduct a program evaluation of Portland Street Response that is guided by three primary purposes:

1. Examine the overall effectiveness of Portland Street Response
2. Provide suggestions for continued program refinement and adaptation following its citywide expansion
3. Provide recommendations for sustaining and institutionalizing PSR as a permanent and co-equal branch of the first response system in Portland

The mixed-methods evaluation is comprehensive, community centered, and includes feedback from a variety of stakeholders and sources, including interviews with unhoused community members and others served by Portland Street Response. This evaluation report covers the program's second year of operation (April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023) following the citywide expansion of PSR.

Program Performance and Outcomes

Call Characteristics

- In the second year of Portland Street Response (April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023), PSR responded to 7,418 incidents, which is a 509% increase from the same reporting period in the first year of the program (1,219 incidents).
- 94% of calls were dispatched by BOEC (73% from 911 calls and 21% from calls to the non-emergency number), and 6% from PSR self-dispatch
- Of the 7,418 calls for service, 7,238 (97.6%) were calls traditionally responded to by the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) and 180 (2.4%) were calls traditionally responded to by Portland Fire & Rescue (PF&R)
- The average response time was 30 minutes and 13 seconds
- The average on-scene time was 29 minutes and 30 seconds for all calls, and 47 minutes and 10 seconds for calls involving client contact
- 6.1% of all calls involved co-response with other units (e.g., PPB, PF&R, AMR), while 93.9% of calls involved no co-response
- PSR staff made 894 referrals to service in their initial contacts with clients in the field, with the majority of these referrals (542) made to PSR community health workers and peer support specialists
- PSR initiated 670 transports to hospitals, walk-in clinics, and clients' homes
- 68.4% of calls involved someone experiencing homelessness
- 60.2% of all client contacts involved someone with suspected mental health needs
- 280 clients (7.6% of calls with clients) were identified as high utilizers of PSR services
- The most common outcome of calls with clients was that the client was treated by PSR and released (42.1% of all calls)
- One PSR call (a co-response with police) resulted in a client arrest

Outcome Goals

Outcome 1: Reduce the number of calls traditionally responded to by police where no crime is being committed.

The PSR call load represented a 3.5% reduction in total calls that police would have traditionally responded to during PSR's operating hours.

Outcome 2: Reduce the number of behavioral health and non-emergency calls traditionally responded to by police and fire.

PSR activity represented a 19% reduction in PPB response on non-emergency welfare checks and unwanted persons calls during PSR's operating hours.

PSR activity represented a reduction of 3% in PF&R activity on behavioral health, illegal burn, and non-emergency medical calls during operating hours.

Outcome 3: Reduce the number of medically non-life-threatening 911 calls that are transported to the emergency department.

PSR was able to resolve the vast majority of its calls in the field, with only 187 clients (2.5% of all calls) transported to the hospital for additional care.

Resources and Follow-up

Clients served by Portland Street Response received a variety of resources to address their basic needs, including 2,626 snacks or food boxes; 2,280 water bottles; 2,210 sleeping bags, blankets, or tents; and 1,283 clothing items.

PSR Community health workers and peer support specialists worked with a total of 127 clients who were referred to them from the PSR first responders. They completed 1,518 visits with PSR clients and made 216 referrals to service, including 71 housing applications and referrals, 42 shelter referrals, 20 medical referrals, and a variety of other referrals. During the second year of the program, 10 clients obtained permanent housing, 21 were connected to primary healthcare providers, and 22 were enrolled in healthcare coverage as a result of their work with PSR.

Community Engagement

PSR staff also engaged over 6,000 community members in outreach and engagement activities during the second year of the program. This outreach work included de-escalation trainings for local businesses, heatwave and winter weather outreach, mobile showers, and tabling at community events to help educate community members about PSR.

Stakeholder Feedback

Unhoused Community Members and Others Served by PSR

We worked with the Street Roots Ambassador Program to conduct surveys with 405 unhoused community members about their knowledge of and experience with Portland Street Response, as well as their experience with other first responders.

- 191 unhoused community members we spoke with (47.2%) had heard of Portland Street Response and 133 (55.9%) had not.
- 59 of 405 unhoused community members (14.6%) reported specific interactions with Portland Street Response, ranging from meeting them during outreach activities to receiving services from them.
- 168 unhoused community members (41.5%) reported having interacted with other first responders in the three months prior to our surveys, with the most frequent interactions (39.9%) being with EMTs or paramedics.

- Because PSR is dispatched through 911, it was also important to determine if unhoused people feel safe calling 911 if they or someone else needs help. A total of 171 people (42.2% of those surveyed) reported not feeling safe calling 911, with reasons ranging from legal concerns to not trusting police to help them.

We also conducted 20 interviews with PSR clients about their experience with the program. They described the kind, compassionate, client-centered approach of the team; and an appreciation for how staff worked closely with them to reach their goals. When asked to rate their satisfaction with PSR on a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best), clients rated the program 4.8 out of 5.

PSR Staff

We conducted quarterly individual interviews with PSR staff to ask how they feel the program is working for them, lessons learned from their experience in the field, and additional resources or support they need to do their jobs effectively. The team discussed their deep commitment and care for the people they serve, and the diverse skills and experiences they bring to the work. They noted wanting more structure and support in their jobs, and the need for additional role clarification, training opportunities, and supervision. They also discussed challenges related to staffing shortages during the program's expansion, cultural differences between PSR and PF&R, service and resource gaps that make it difficult to connect clients to services and resources, and concerns about PSR's changing mission.

Other First Responders and Dispatchers

We conducted focus groups and individual interviews with Portland Police Bureau (PPB), Portland Fire & Rescue (PF&R), Community Health Assess & Treat (CHAT), and Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC) staff to assess their experiences with and general attitudes toward Portland Street Response, and to gauge how the program may ease their workload and serve as an additional resource to assist in the field. While CHAT staff reported numerous experiences working with PSR in the field and an appreciation for PSR's skills in mental health and de-escalation, PF&R and PPB staff reported fewer direct experiences working with PSR, though they recognized the value of the program in responding to calls involving mental health. Staff from BOEC, PPB, and PF&R suggested the importance of increased communication with PSR and wanted more information about what they do in the field and the outcomes of their calls.

General Community Members

We conducted 276 surveys with people living and working throughout the city of Portland about their knowledge of and experience with Portland Street Response, as well as their experience with other first responders.

- 185 community members we spoke with (67%) had heard of Portland Street Response and 91 (33%) had not. Rates of awareness were higher among White community members than community members of color (70.6% vs. 58.8%)
- 52 of 276 community members (18.8%) reported specific interactions with PSR, most typically calling 911 or the non-emergency number to request assistance and meeting the team when they responded in the field.
- Almost half of those we spoke with (132 people, 47.8%) reported not feeling safe calling 911 if they or someone else needed help, with many people discussing concerns about delayed service or non-response, and others being concerned that calling 911 might negatively impact other community members, especially people of color and people experiencing homelessness.

We also conducted follow-up interviews with 30 community members who had direct experience interacting with Portland Street Response. People described their gratitude for PSR's kind and calm manner with clients and discussed the program as a valuable response for people experiencing mental health distress or homelessness. They also discussed frustrations accessing 911 and delayed response from PSR and other first responders. They suggested that having more PSR teams available would increase program impact and encouraged continued collaboration, outreach, and education in the community.

Recommendations and Conclusions

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. However, despite these successes, there are both internal and external factors that risk stalling PSR's growth and continued success. These factors will need to be attended to carefully to keep PSR on the successful track it has been on since its implementation. Below, we revisit, review, and expand upon the recommendations we offered up in our Year Two midpoint program evaluation, commenting on progress made and work still to be done.

1. Continue to Address Staffing Issues that Impact Program Success

Staffing shortages and turnover remain a considerable challenge and barrier to the program's success. It is important to ensure that there are adequate full-time staff available at all times to meet the ever-increasing demands for PSR, and for the program to be able to operate 24/7. It is also important to work with staff to clarify roles, integrate peer support specialists more regularly into the first response work, and encourage connections between team members.

2. Continue to Provide More Structure and Support

Staff expressed the need for more structure and support in doing their work. In particular, having more clearly documented policies and protocols; additional training opportunities; more regular clinical supervision; increased transparency pertaining to job performance evaluations; and more opportunities for shared decision making with leadership would help staff feel more supported and address stress and burnout issues they face in their work.

3. Continue to Refine Call Criteria and Call Type

As we have recommended in previous reports, it is important to consider additional call types and criteria that would be appropriate for PSR to respond to, including calls inside residences, calls involving suicide, and some calls involving higher levels of acuity. Further, while not directly associated with a specific call type, the ability to transport clients directly to hospitals, shelters, drop-in clinics, and medical appointments would expand the role that PSR can play in connecting clients to services.

4. Continue to Prioritize Communication, Outreach, and Engagement

Continued efforts are needed to educate community members, other first responders, and dispatchers about the purpose and scope of PSR's work. PSR can help better educate other responders and dispatchers by developing training videos, providing documentation of call outcomes, and providing in-service trainings at BOEC related to PSR's work. Continued outreach efforts to ensure that community members throughout the city are informed about PSR are also needed, as is the convening of a community advisory board to help provide community oversight of PSR's work.

5. Adhere to the Original Mission of PSR and Resist Scope Creep

As programs grow and evolve, there are often political and financial pressures that risk taking them off course. While PSR has been largely successful in adhering to its original program mission thus far, recent programmatic policy changes and mandates cause some concern. These include directives requiring PSR to be present during city-ordered homeless sweeps and the banning or curtailing of resources (e.g., tents, food boxes) that PSR clients use to meet basic needs and PSR staff use to build trust and relationships with people in crisis.

6. Consider a New Home for PSR if Tensions with PF&R Cannot be Resolved

As we have noted in previous reports, there are clear and compelling reasons to keep Portland Street Response housed within Portland Fire & Rescue. However, our two years of evaluating PSR have led us to conclude that there are numerous areas of misalignment between PSR and the Fire Bureau. If these differences cannot be adequately addressed and reconciled, other possible homes for PSR should be evaluated, including the Community Safety Division (CSD) or a stand-alone bureau for PSR and possibly other alternative response programs.

Since its launch in February 2021, PSR has weathered an ongoing global pandemic, extreme climatic events, gaping holes in Portland's behavioral health system of care, substantial growing pains, and threats to the program's core mission. The program and its partners have substantial work ahead as they grapple with important decisions that will determine the future of Portland Street Response. However, throughout all of this, program staff have never lost sight of the transformative role they play in providing a compassionate alternative response to people experiencing crisis in Portland.



A Portland Street Response EMT responds to a PSR call for service. (Photo courtesy of the City of Portland).