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Believe Our Stories & Listen: Portland Street Response Survey Report

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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



Portland State
Homelessness Research
& Action Collaborative

**street
roots**

MAPPING
ACTION
COLLECTIVE



**Yellow
Brick
Road**



**SISTERS
OF THE
ROAD**



Believe our stories and listen
Portland Street Response survey report
Sept. 19, 2019

Report prepared by Greg Townley, Research Director, Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative and Associate Professor of Community Psychology at PSU; Kaia Sand, Street Roots Executive Director; & Thea Kindschuh, Mapping Action Collective

Cover Photo Credit: Katalina Berbari. Pictured: Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer and Mode

Additional report copies available at news.streetroots.org/portlandstreetresponse

The Portland Street Response Community Outreach workgroup spearheaded this survey: Yesenia Carillo with the Office of Commissioner Amanda Fritz; Ebony Clarke, Multnomah County Director of Mental Health and Addiction Services Division; Angela Donley with the Office of Commissioner Jayapal; Thea Kindschuh with Mapping Action Collective; Matt McNally with the Office of Commissioner Hardesty; Ibrahim Mubarak, Executive Director of Right 2 Survive; Greg Townley with Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative; Winta Johannes with the Office of Commissioner Eudaly; Kaia Sand, Street Roots; and Neal Sand, Yellow Brick Road.

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.

Thank you to the surveyors: Holly Brott, Celeste Blair, Matthew Brown, Cornell Clemons, Rick Davis, Tina Drake, Cory Elia, Curtis "Zen" Faith, Mykel Gardner, Daniel Hoffman, Alissa Keny-Guyer, Jeremy, Brian Lane, Charles LaPram Jr, Emily Leickly, Dave Lonon, Randal Lutz, George McCarthy, Brandon Morgove, Mode, Vince Masiello, Sarah Mercurio, Wayne Moore, David Northcut, Wendy Nuttelman, Marcie Possinger, Don Peterson, Marta Petteni, Thomas Robertson, Mark Rodriguez, Neal Sand, Sean Sheffield, Donald Short Jr., Katricia Stewart, Laeth Tabb, Raven Thicket, Amy Turco, Chris Wagoner, Kathy Wai and Jeremy Young.

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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

Methods

survey development

We developed the survey to provide an open platform for unhoused individuals to discuss their needs and preferences in what the Portland Street Response (PSR) should look like. Questions and sample response options were based on themes that emerged during listening sessions with unhoused individuals facilitated by Commissioner Hardesty at Sisters of the Road and JOIN. Questions included how first responders should present themselves, what they should have with them, under what circumstances they should be present, and what services they should provide. Sample

response options included lists of potential first responders (e.g., firefighters, mental health professionals, nurses), types of supplies and services they should offer (e.g., first aid, food/water, transportation), and types of training responders should have (e.g., trauma-informed, de-escalation, cultural competency). After the survey was drafted, we shared the document with a variety of stakeholders, including advocates, service providers, and elected officials' staff. Modifications were made based on their suggestions.



(Above) Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty and her Community Outreach Coordinator, Matt McNally, and Portland Fire and Rescue Community Health Assessment Team Manager Tremaine Clayton led a listening session at Sisters of the Road. (Right) Hardesty convenes a listening session at JOIN.



Trainings

Before conducting the surveys, participants gathered at Street Roots for a training led by Ibrahim Mubarak of Right 2 Survive and Neal Sand of Yellow Brick Road to discuss how to safely approach people with respect and without making assumptions about their needs and experiences. Right 2 Survive has previously conducted surveys of people in encampments for the Western Regional Advocacy Project. Yellow Brick Road trains volunteers on how to provide street outreach.



Ibrahim Mubarak and Neal Sand lead the July 16 training at Street Roots

Greg Townley and Thea Kindschuh from Portland State University instructed surveyors to engage willing individuals in conversation and write down the information that emerged. Given the goal of engaging respondents in a dialogue about PSR, they emphasized the importance of being flexible and allowing individuals to respond to questions in an open manner rather than using a more standardized approach with specific, limited response options.



"Centering the voices of those who are often left out of these public safety policy conversations is the most powerful part of this experience."

– Greg Townley, Research Director for the PSU Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative

Greg Townley and Thea Kindschuh explain the survey process.

Survey process

After the trainings each day, participants formed teams of two or three, each led by a Street Roots vendor or someone else with lived experience of homelessness. Portland State University students working with the Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative joined many teams. As they left Street Roots, teams selected locations based on areas of the city scheduled for sweeps in the coming weeks, or based on Street Roots vendors' knowledge of camps, shelters, sidewalks, and parks where they knew people would be gathering.

Survey teams canvassed their designated areas for two to three hours. They approached individuals on sidewalks, in camps, and in shelters to ask them if they were willing to speak with them about their experience interacting with first responders. Conversations ranged from very brief (five minutes) to quite lengthy (30 to 45 minutes), with the intention of allowing survey respondents to share their experiences interacting with first responders and think about what a preferred model could look like. Responses were recorded with pen and pencil on paper copies of the survey.

Survey teams brought bags of granola bars, toilet paper, sewing kits, batteries, copies of the Street Roots Rose City Resource Guide, and other basic necessities to thank people for taking the time to talk with us. While some individuals we approached were busy doing other things or not interested in speaking with us, the vast majority of those who we approached were willing to speak with us and were appreciative of the opportunity to inform PSR.



Survey teams referred to maps from the City of Portland Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program to locate camps slated to be swept. While this provided knowledge of current camps, some had been swept before survey teams arrived.

Media coverage of survey process

[KGW](#)

[Portland Mercury](#)

[Street Roots](#)

[Village Portland](#)

This project resonated with a [wide audience on social media](#) as well, with dozens of social media posts that were [shared by many people](#) and organizations.



Cory Elia surveyed people on the Springwater Corridor where he was houseless from 2010 to 2013. He wrote an account of his experience surveying for *Village Portland*.

"The most disheartening part of this excursion was when my group ventured on to the part of the Springwater Corridor that runs parallel to the 97th Ave MAX stop and saw a Rapid Response work crew conducting a sweep of the camps."

– Cory Elia



Street Roots vendors Amy Turco and Sean Sheffield surveyed people at the camp where they were staying as well neighboring camps.

"It is important to get the word from the streets. The homeless community has more trust with other members of the homeless community than with the housed community."

– Sean Sheffield



Street Roots vendors Cornell Clemons and Mark Rodriguez and Yellow Brick Road supervisor Neal Sand surveyed people camping in Old Town.

"[The surveying experience] was beautiful and lovely. Through the work of Street Roots we could help lots of other people."

– Cornell Clemons

Methods: accounts from surveyors

"You can live in the woods, and when you get back indoors, you will be amazed how your opinions can change." – George McCarthy

"I enjoyed partnering with the Street Roots vendors. I think that their presence broke down barriers and made it easier for folks to trust me, which allowed for richer conversation."

– Holly Brott, Community Psychology graduate student at PSU



Street Roots vendor George McCarthy and PSU student Holly Brott paired up, surveying at the Do Good Multnomah shelter. Holly marveled conversations she never would have had without George, and George appreciated listening to how Holly presented the survey and summarized ideas.

"I went to St. Francis and CityTeam, and people were open because I know people there. People were glad that something like that's going to happen."

– David Northcut



Street Roots vendors Chris Wagoner and David Northcut surveyed at St. Francis and CityTeam.

"These interactions provided me with a greater understanding of the needs of those experiencing homelessness, and the entire survey process was a window into the way organizations, activists, and students can collaborate to ensure that underrepresented voices are heard."

– Wendy Nuttelman, Applied Linguistics graduate student at PSU

"It was encouraging to see people from different backgrounds and affiliations coming together to address an issue. But I most appreciate the Street Roots vendors I worked with who let me into their world. I hope we have a chance to collaborate again in the future."

– Emily Leickly, Community Psychology graduate student at PSU

"Clearly there are experts in our communities with lived experiences whom we should be listening to and collaborating with in order to implement long-term, compassionate solutions that serve the community as a whole."

– Katricia Stewart, Community Psychology graduate student at PSU

"The experience has brought color to the lived experience of homelessness that I did not have before. I learned about the many perspectives that unhoused people have toward police and medical personnel, and, where those services fail, the day to day strategies the people we interviewed use to care for themselves and one another."

– Sarah Mercurio, Urban Studies graduate student at PSU

"The Portland Street response experience importantly shaped my knowledge around homelessness and first response operations in Portland by putting me in direct contact with the local community. I hope those voices and insights will support further research and projects for the homeless population, in the belief that they should be involved in shaping their solutions and interventions."

– Marta Petteni, Designer and Research Analyst, Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative



Street Roots vendor Wayne Moore surveyed near Sisters of the Road with two PSU students.

*"All media needs to keep building on this idea."
– Wayne Moore*



Street Books librarians surveyed at Voz/MLK Workers' Center, St. Francis Parish, and Sisters of the Road



Data Analysis

Three researchers tabulated, categorized, and coded responses pertaining to each of the survey questions. Questions 1, 2, 3, and 8 were open-ended and required thematic coding. For example, for Question 1 (“Have you interacted with a first responder, and if so, what was it like?”), we grouped findings into two general categories of negative and positive experiences. Within each category, we further grouped responses and identified general themes, including attitude and treatment; reason for the response; response time; sweeps; responder roles/which responder; responder competency/provision of help; and relationship development.

Questions 4, 5, 6, and 7 included lists of possible response options that were tallied to yield numeric totals. Each of these questions also allowed respondents to indicate other answers that were not provided as response options. In some cases, these responses were grouped into pre-existing categories, while in other cases they were used to create new categories or retained in a general “other” category.

Findings

On July 16 and July 18, 2019, members of Street Roots, Sisters of the Road, Right 2 Survive, Street Books, the Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative at PSU, the Mapping Action Collective, Yellow Brick Road, and Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty's office interviewed 184 unhoused individuals across the city (see map below) to help inform the design of the Portland Street Response (PSR).

Below we report summary findings from each survey question before outlining general recommendations and conclusions. Responses are not intended to be aggregated or wholly summative, but rather provide general considerations for the PSR from those living outside or in shelter. The information collected is intended to be considered alongside other data sources to determine the best pilot model for the PSR.

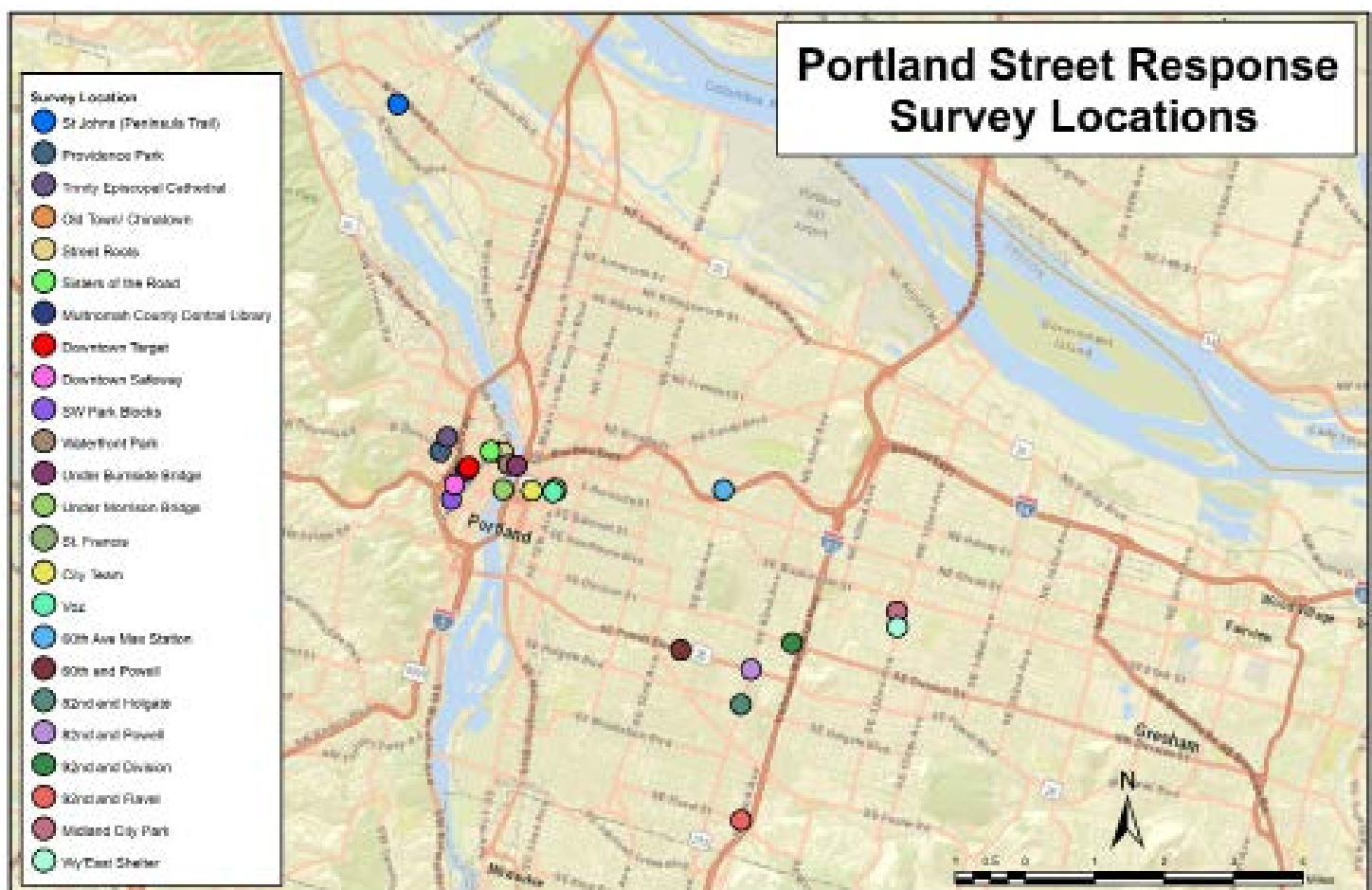


Figure 1: Map of Portland Street Response Unhoused Survey locations

Question 1: Have you interacted with a first responder, and if so, what was it like? Was there anything positive about any of your experiences that you'd like to see more of?

Responses ranged from negative to positive, and varied widely. In general, most of the negative comments were associated with police officers, while the positive comments included a mix of information about police, firefighters, and EMTs. Other reasons for the negative or positive experiences are provided below.

Negative Interaction	Positive Interaction
Attitude and treatment (e.g., people treated rudely and without compassion)	Attitude and treatment (e.g., responder was calm, genuine, reassuring)
Reason for response (e.g., police are not needed because person is just trying to sleep, get food, find shelter)	Responder competency/ provision of help (e.g., a firefighter gave water, listened, and was kind)
Responder roles/ which responder (e.g., need better classification of the problem and clarification of who should respond)	Relationship development (e.g., getting to know people and building a relationship with them)
Response time (e.g., slow response or not at all)	
Sweeps (e.g., a first responder told a camp they had to leave on Christmas Eve, threw away all belongings)	

Table 1: Reason for rating first responder experience positive or negative

Regardless of how they rated their interaction, numerous respondents discussed being treated rudely rather than with politeness and respect. Lastly, respondents discussed the necessity of faster response times for health concerns, emergencies, or violence. Additional comments about their experiences with first responders are included on the following pages.

Negative

"Police are not helpful."

"Horrible, embarrassing, degrading, make you feel unwanted, like scum."

"They don't respond. I called police three times, and they didn't come."

"Most of the interactions have been with police - they had been called on by business owners mostly. The police don't help them - waste of time. Person is just trying to sleep, get food, find shelter."

"Mom was suicidal. I helped her call 911 - wanted mental health person, not cops, as mom was deeply afraid of cops. But mental health person not available. Five cops responded."

"People won't call 911 because they don't want police to respond. They're afraid, and people are dying."

Positive

"First responder was very calm, very genuine, reassuring."

"Officers had good mutual respect for people on the streets"

"Twice cops came in the night to check up on us to make sure we were okay and that there were no homicides in the area"

"The first responders were compassionate, supportive, and got my friend the help she needed in a way she was totally comfortable with"

Question 2: In what situations would you like police to be present?
Question 3: In what situations would you not want police involved?

The next two sections summarize individuals' responses to questions about when police should or should not be present in response to crisis calls. While many respondents stated that they would never call the police and that police should not be present for any responses, many others reported a more nuanced opinion of when police should or should not be present. The table below shows the situations in which respondents largely thought police should be present or not present, and situations where respondents disagreed. There was not a clear consensus about these issues, but emergent themes included the following:

Should be present	Areas of disagreement	Should not be present
Theft Robbery Harassment Violent crimes, weapons Rape Danger to a child Domestic violence	Danger of suicide Intoxication De-escalation Aggression/ nonviolent conflict/ arguments	Camping, sleeping, loitering Drug overdoses Mental health crises, including someone not on their medications

Table 2: When police should and should not be present

"What is weird and what is against the law are two different things."

"Once, somebody needed an ambulance, and cops arrived. I'd want the EMTs to be the first responders."

"[Police shouldn't be present] when we're just trying to survive."

"If someone is just camping, minding their own business [police shouldn't be present]."

"Addiction issues in any situation – no cops."

Question 4: Who should be involved instead of police?

When asked who should be involved as first responders instead of police, 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. The figure below illustrates the number of respondents who suggested each category of potential first responder.

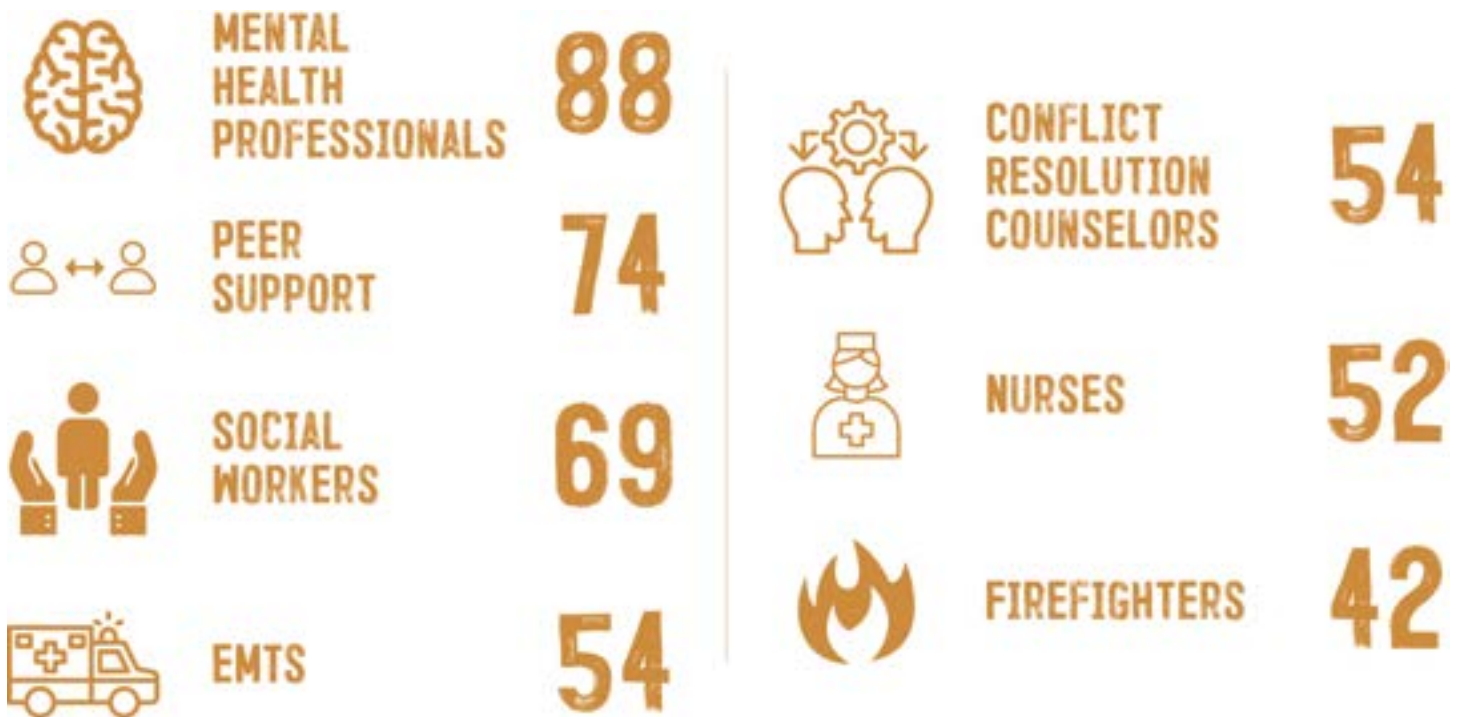


Figure 2: Who should the Portland Street Response (PSR) first responders be?

Other recommendations included:

- Anyone but police
- Depends on the situation
- Crisis, grief counselors
- Medical teams walking around
- People who can provide legal advice
- People who can provide transportation
- Teams with varied representation
- People who can't arrest you. When cops appear, people with warrants disperse. The ones who disperse are often the ones who need help.
- Appreciate cops doing their job, but don't need cops and firefighters as often

Question 5: How would you want them to approach you? What would make you feel safe?

Respondents provided a variety of suggestions for how first responders should approach them, including what would make them feel safe. First, individuals noted the importance of having assurance that their IDs would not be run to check for outstanding warrants. Second, respondents noted that provision of food and water is a critical component of the street response. Individuals also wanted assurance that weapons would not be present. When asked specific questions about what types of uniforms or other visual signs of affiliation with the PSR should be considered, the most popular response was “colored shirts.” Some respondents thought that uniforms could be helpful if they clearly distinguished them from other first responders, while sirens and flashing lights should be avoided.

Assurances	Appearance
<p>IDs won't be run for warrants (86 respondents)</p> <p>Provision of food, water (81)</p> <p>Weapons won't be present (66)</p> <p>Police won't be present (54)</p> <p>Deportation agencies won't be notified (47)</p> <p>Anonymity of caller (40)</p>	<p>Colored shirts (47)</p> <p>Uniforms (29 yes, 11 no)</p> <p>Vests (24)</p> <p>Designated vehicles (23)</p> <p>Sirens/ lights (3 yes, 17 no)</p>

Table 3: Assurances, appearance of PSR responders that would make people feel safe

Findings

Other responses included:

"Obviously not police"

"Regular people without badges"

"Open mindedness"

"Not a person in uniform"

"Anything given that is needed"

"Wearing a smile"

"A pastor would be good"

"Non-judgmental"

"Make it easy for me to understand."

"Don't start asking questions and making assumptions."

"Don't bring the police attitude."

"Don't make it look like I'm giving you information and snitching."

"Presenting and announcing themselves, asking opinions"

"Easy to talk to and patient"

"Like a person, no different from them"

"Don't be racist."

"Believe our stories and listen."

"Don't get too close to my tent."

"People just need someone to listen."

"Don't just assume I need mental health treatment."

Question 6: What supplies would you like them to be able to provide?

Again, food and water were noted as important supplies for first responders to bring with them, along with hygiene products, backpacks or bags for people's belongings and first aid/ medical care supplies. Respondents also discussed the importance of responders connecting them to or making referrals to housing and health services with transportation to services being the second most commonly reported answer to this question.

Health/ Medical	Basic services	Additional suggestions
Food/ water (97 respondents) First Aid and Non-Emergency Medical Care (79) Hygiene products (77) Needle Exchange (73) Wound care (71) Suicide Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention (70) Insulin (69) Recovery services/ Respite beds (50) Naloxone (42) Substance Abuse (40)	Transportation to Services (83) Storage for belongings (81) Backpacks/ bags (79) Crisis Counseling (77) Protection from threat/ danger (74) Clothing (73) Resource Connection and Referrals (66) Transportation of partner or dependents (65) Housing Crisis (63) Grief and loss counseling (61) Pet care/ accommodations (57) Conflict Resolution and Mediation (54) Protection from/ separation from partner (50)	A good word Natural healing Dental services Hygiene services - restrooms, showers, laundry vouchers Somewhere to go Supplies: Socks Portable chargers Flashlights Foot powder Baby wipes Umbrellas Heating supplies Tarps Emergency blanket Hand sanitizer

Table 4: Types of supplies and aid that PSR first responders should offer

Question 7: What kinds of training would you like them to have?

Reflecting the general importance of mental health services noted throughout this summary, “mental health awareness” was the most common answer when people were asked what kinds of training first responders should have. Respondents also noted here and elsewhere how important it is for responders to have good listening skills and to not make assumptions about what the person needs without first learning about what is going on in their lives. The figure below illustrates the number of respondents who indicated the importance of each type of training included in the survey.

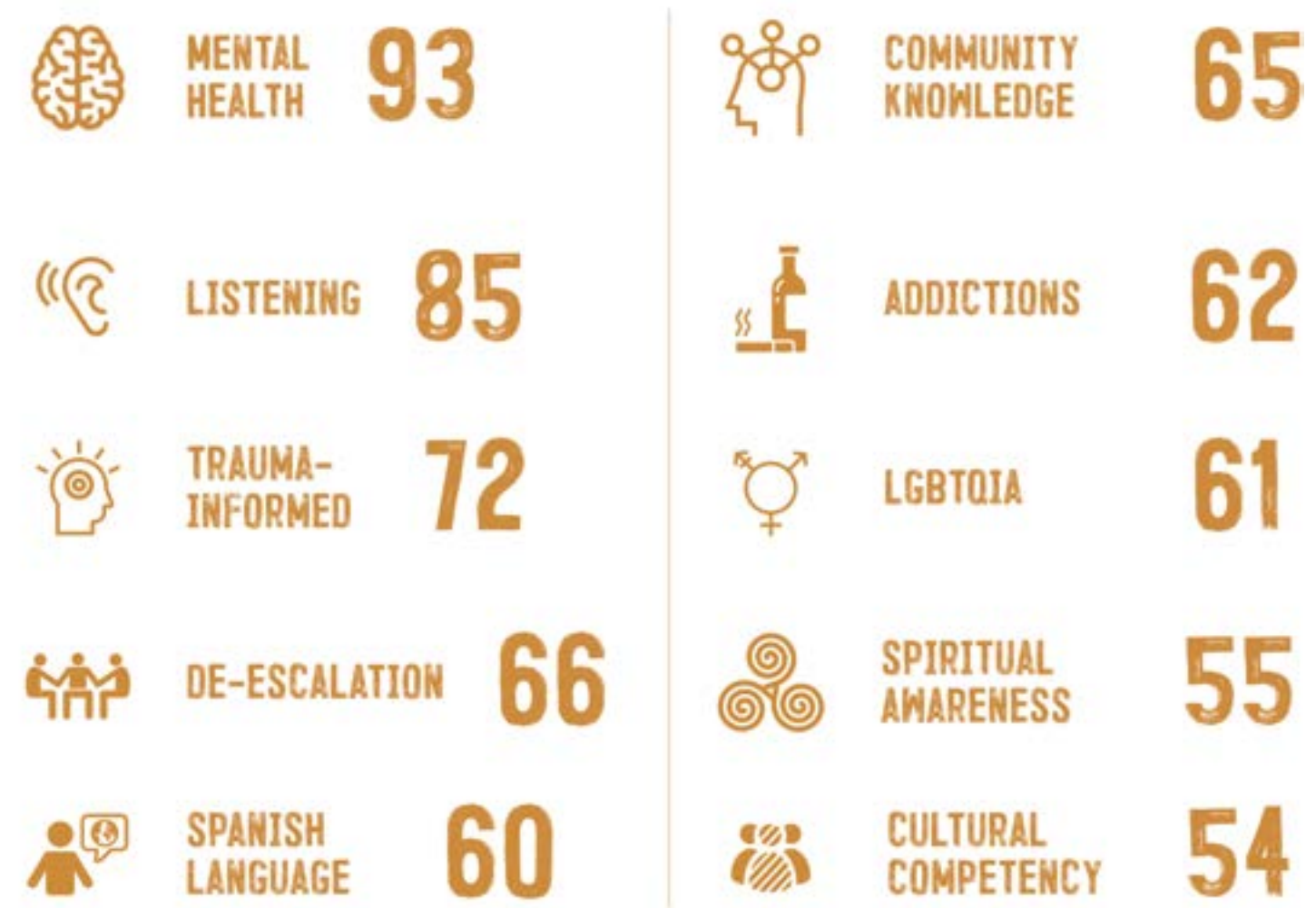


Figure 3: Types of training that PSR first responders should have

Other recommendations included: urban studies, medical training, survival skills, lived experience, sign language

“[They] should be able to recognize drugs/ medication. I look like I’m using when I’m not because of my medication, dehydration, etc. Someone trained on the difference is important.”

“All very important, they’re not going to assume things if they’re aware of all the things listed. Sensitivity to what’s going on.”

Question 8: What other considerations would you like the Portland Street Response to keep in mind?

The people we spoke with were overwhelmingly positive, supportive, and excited about the Portland Street Response. Numerous individuals concluded their conversations with us by emphasizing the importance of respecting human dignity and treating people who are unhoused as human beings with a variety of complex life circumstances and needs.

In addition to providing specific suggestions for the street response program (e.g., having people who are unhoused involved as first responders; providing legal advice), respondents also noted broader suggestions for the city to consider (e.g., providing more space for people to camp; turning land into shelter space self-managed by unhoused people; and developing hygiene stations). People we surveyed are excited to learn that changes are being made to how first responders engage with people experiencing homelessness, stating “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.”

Considerations were grouped into the following themes:

Respectfulness, dignity, and humanity:

“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 labelled or called an ‘unwanted person’.”

“They are really people with real issues, and to them it might BE life or death. Don’t compartmentalize them!”

Provision of transportation, resources, housing, and spaces to just be:

“Refer or transport to spaces you’re allowed to be.”

“Availability of resources. People need response and resources all the time.”

Findings

Importance of mental health services:

"Not everyone is out here on drugs. Some are because of mental health issues or because they lost a family member/ partner/ spouse."

"Mental health is a big problem on the streets. Mental health counselor should be on the Portland Street Response."

Additional suggestions include:

"When stepping into a situation to keep an open mind. There is always more to a story/ situation than what you first see. Don't assume or judge, ask questions, ask what they think would resolve the problem the best."

"Common sense – do not rely on profiling, book smarts. Do not be like parole officers."

"Have people on the streets be the responders"

"Re-educate people about what 911 is for. It's for emergency."

"Response team should meet everyone, get to know people."

"PSR should have scheduled time for review by peer support specialists, advocates, and those currently homeless."

Recommendations

We provide the following recommendations for the Portland Street Response pilot project based on the findings presented above, with a reminder that these should be considered alongside other data sources noted in a later section of this report.

Portland Street Response needs to be separate from the police.

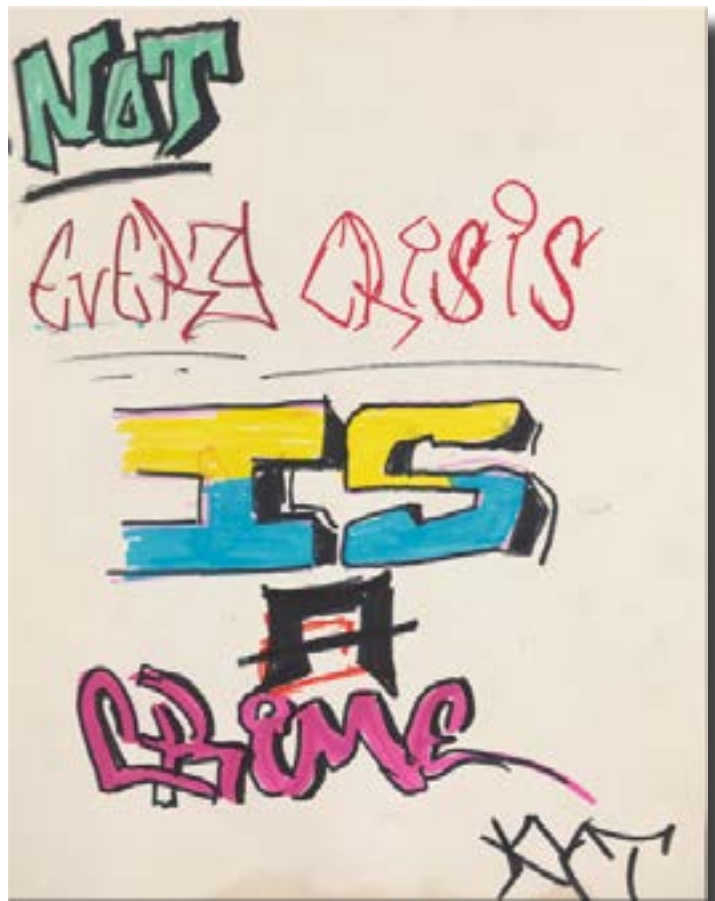
While many respondents stated that they would never call the police and that police should not be present for any responses, others wanted police presence for certain situations, particularly when it came to theft, robbery, harassment, violent crimes, and danger to a child.

Findings suggest that some members of the unhoused community value the police for their role in addressing violent crime and protecting safety in certain situations, but want other responders for calls about camping, sleeping, drug overdoses, and mental health crises.

Prioritize training in mental health, de-escalation, trauma and listening

When asked who the first responders should be instead of police, the most common response was “mental health professionals.” Similarly, when asked what types of training they should have, “mental health” was most commonly noted. However, participants also expressed the importance of social workers for referring people to housing and health services, conflict resolution counselors, and peer support specialists and/ or people with lived experience of homelessness. Further, some respondents expressed concern about over-emphasizing the role of mental health

clinicians who may be too quick to diagnose or suggest medication or hospitalization. They prefer that responders come equipped with listening skills, de-escalation training, and an understanding of trauma-informed care. First responders also need to be very familiar with the local community and with available housing and health service resources.



“Not Every Crisis is a Crime.” Poster art made by a Street Roots vendor.

“What is weird and what is against the law are two different things.”

– survey respondent

Recommendations

Portland Street Response should not be armed or run warrant checks

First responders can make the unhoused community feel safe through a variety of measures. The top suggestions included an assurance that background checks would not be run for outstanding warrants, that weapons would not be present, and that food, water, and other basic necessities would be offered. Other helpful supplies include hygiene products, backpacks or bags for people's belongings, and first aid/ medical care supplies.

Uniforms should be recognizable and distinct from other first responders

Colored shirts with a logo and designated vehicles were suggested as ways to make the PSR responders recognizable and distinct from other teams.

Referrals and transportation services would help the teams be effective

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.

Connect PSR with places where people can go

Given the number of people who mentioned the importance of having a place to go when they are in crisis, there is an opportunity to connect PSR with Multnomah County's recent purchase of the Bushong building at 333 SW Park Ave., which they hope to turn into a walk-in center for people experiencing homelessness, mental illnesses and addictions. County elected and health officials intend for this to be a space where

people can address basic needs (e.g., taking a shower, doing laundry), engage with mental health services, use the computer or charge a phone, and access transitional housing.

Several respondents also discussed the need to devote more city and county land to villages and shelter space managed by unhoused individuals, as well as developing more hygiene stations.

Educate community members about emergency calls

Several respondents discussed frustrations with community members who call 911 whenever they see a homeless person or tent, typically when no emergency is present.

This reflects a growing trend of “unwanted persons” calls, which have [increased by more than 60% since 2013](#). Indeed, Portlanders place these types of calls, on average, once every 15 minutes. Similarly, as [Street Roots reported in March 2019](#), Portland's Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC) received more than 24,000 police non-emergency and 911 calls related to homelessness in 2018. Of these, 80% were categorized as low priority.

When police show up to non-emergency calls related to nuisance or behavioral issues, it can lead to an arrest, which can then lead to barriers in people accessing housing and employment. There is a need to better educate community members about when to call 911, when to call the police non-emergency number, and [when to call other teams](#) (e.g., Cascadia's Project Respond, Central City Concern's CHIERS) to address public safety concerns and medical issues that individuals

experiencing homelessness may face. It also speaks to the importance of Portland Street Response working closely with BOEC to know when PSR should be dispatched instead of police officers, and to consider eventually having its own designated call-line.

Treat people with compassion and dignity

A common underlying theme across the results is a call to be treated humanely and with dignity. Numerous individuals concluded their conversations with us by emphasizing the importance of respecting human dignity and treating people who are unhoused as human beings with a variety of complex life circumstances and needs. In the poignant words of one respondent, “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 labelled or called an ‘unwanted person.’”

First responders should approach people with compassion and avoid making assumptions about their situation. They should listen to their needs and work with the individual to best identify the necessary supports and services. It is critical for responders to have an awareness of the trauma of being homeless and the very real risks that people face on a daily basis, including the alarming [violent acts committed by housed individuals against unhoused people](#).

“Re-educate people about what 911 is for. It’s for emergency.”
– survey respondent

Additional Considerations

There are a few limitations about this process that should be noted. First, we used convenience sampling, meaning that individuals we spoke to were those who were most accessible and willing to speak with us. We surveyed in various parts of the city, but we primarily stayed downtown, southeast Portland, and other areas close to services and larger encampments. We did not go into harder-to-reach camps, nor did we include people living in doubled-up situations (e.g., couch-surfing) or transitional housing. Despite our somewhat limited scope, we did find quite a bit of overlap in information reported from people we interviewed in different settings, including camps, shelters, and service centers. Our findings also paralleled the information obtained in listening sessions with unhoused individuals at JOIN, Sisters of the Road Central City Concern and Yellow Brick Road day center. This makes us confident that while we may have missed the important perspectives of certain segments of people experiencing homelessness, our findings are representative of the experiences of many, including those who are most likely to benefit from Portland Street Response.

Second, we did not collect detailed demographic information because we wanted to focus on people's general experiences with first responders and attitudes about what PSR should look like. Collecting demographic information would have added a considerable amount of time to the survey and discouraged some individuals from talking with us due to concerns about anonymity. Based on reports from surveyors, it is likely that our findings may over-represent the experiences

of middle-aged, white, cisgender, single men experiencing homelessness, although we also interviewed a number of women and people of color. Many respondents discussed having mental and/or physical disabilities, and a few disclosed being transgender, non-English speakers, and veterans. Based on concerns about over-representing male-identified individuals in our interviews, we conducted several follow-up interviews at a women's care day at Sisters of the Road.

Finally, we purposefully designed the survey to be flexible and adaptable, and to promote discussion and open sharing of information. Surveys were not conducted uniformly, and

Women's Care Day at Sisters of the Road

Because women are sometimes partnered with people for safety, they aren't always able to speak freely if they have dissenting opinions, so we expanded our surveying to include the Women's Care Day at Sisters of the Road on Sept. 6. The first Friday of every month, Sisters of the Road provides a time when women can be together and get some of the care and connectedness that they may not typically experience outside, receiving chair massages and manicures, selecting jewelry, coloring in coloring books. Women can feel more at ease to speak freely than they might outside.

thus information that respondents contributed was based on what individuals chose to share about a given question rather than responding to structured questions with specific response options. Accordingly, numbers presented in the report should not be read as percentages of the entire sample of 184 respondents, but rather as general trends reflecting respondents' general impressions, attitudes, and needs related to Portland Street Response.

The data collected from this survey represent a very important and often overlooked perspective, but it is just one of many data sources that will be used to inform the Portland Street Response pilot project. We are also doing listening sessions with homelessness service providers and homeless youth, as well as an online survey of neighborhood associations and members of the business community asking about their experiences calling 911 and other first responders, satisfaction with police response, who non-police first responders should be, and types of training that would be helpful for their business or organization (e.g., training in de-escalation, providing hygiene options). Collectively, the information from all of these stakeholder groups will inform a plan for a PSR pilot project to be submitted to City Council in November.

Conclusion

The outpouring of community support and enthusiasm for the Portland Street Response survey of unhoused individuals illustrates community readiness to mobilize around

this important goal of providing a community-based, respectful response to address the current and ongoing needs of our community's unhoused individuals as well as others who may be in crisis. It will be imperative that this street response is timely, that the experiences of the unhoused community are prioritized, and that a high standard of care is given to all community members.

***"Believe our stories and listen."
– survey respondent***