

May 12, 2021

Word Count: 189

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QuickPoint! – Portland Street Response: What Are You Waiting For?

By Vlad Yurlov

Portland's Lents neighborhood got a new homeless program in 2021. Could you tell? For the past three months, a paramedic and a social worker have been connecting homeless people to social services and addressing disturbances. But the pilot team has been waiting for police dispatch to give it leads, so it goes on just two calls per day. Relieving Portland's officers from non-emergency calls is useful, but a proactive approach would be more beneficial for homeless people and worn-out police officers.

The City intended Portland Street Response to reduce interactions between police and homeless people and those in mental crisis. Dispatch calls can be one method of contact, but the team is hitting just one quarter of its capacity.

There have been thousands of calls requesting non-violent interaction with the homeless since the program began. The team could easily fill its capacity by scanning sidewalks and connecting homeless people to resources while waiting for opportunities from dispatch. This would truly prevent police interaction and fulfill the program's mission. Before expanding the program citywide with millions of dollars, Portland Street Response must operate at maximum capacity. Portland deserves proactive solutions.

Vlad Yurlov is a Policy Analyst at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research center.