

The Oregonian

Mayor's Refined Police Proposal Needs More Refining: Editorial

*By The Oregonian Editorial Board
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Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler's proposal to spend \$5.5 million to add 58 new officers to the Portland Police Bureau almost seems like a bargain. Just last month, the police bureau had floated the idea of spending nearly twice as much to add 93 officers to the force. So, it's progress to see the latest request drift closer to the general vicinity of earth.

But while Wheeler has modified the ask, there's still plenty of questions that he and Outlaw should answer. Among them: Why dedicate only two of the new positions to the Behavioral Health Unit, the widely-praised Portland Police unit that pairs officers with health professionals to proactively assist those with mental illness? Another question: Is adding patrol officers the best way to address increased calls for service, which largely concern low or medium-level priority issues? And another: Is Wheeler sufficiently matching the investment in the number of police officers with an investment in accountability?

To be sure, the city does need more police officers. Regardless of whether Portlanders approve of the job that Portland Police has been doing, there's no question that the bureau is understaffed. And that problem will only get worse with dozens of impending retirements over the next few years. The bureau has beefed up recruiting, but many new hires are still in their probationary period, as *The Oregonian/OregonLive's* Maxine Bernstein reported. Chronic understaffing has meant not only overtime spending in the millions of dollars, but a risk of burnout for officers weary of working extra hours.

And Wheeler deserves credit for identifying ways to pay for police and other priorities beyond simply slashing spending in other areas. He has been negotiating a proposal - supported by business community members - to raise license fees that could generate an additional \$15 million. That's almost double the amount that former Mayor Charlie Hales hoped to raise in 2016 with a proposed tax increase that failed to win any support.

But Wheeler misses an opportunity to more strategically target resources and show that the city is thinking more broadly about how it achieves "public safety."

The mayor's budget calls for four dedicated training officers - a good move that aims to prepare all officers for responding to those in mental health crisis. But it's disappointing that Wheeler isn't looking to more aggressively expand the Behavioral Health Unit, which connects people who frequently come in contact with police to mental health services. While the mayor's budget calls for adding two officers to the unit, giving them five officer/counselor teams in total, that modest staffing level limits how promptly it can respond to the more than 1,000 referrals that officers make in a year.

Instead of boldly beefing up that unit, Wheeler's police proposal simply reinforces the backwards way Portland responds to those in mental health crisis: A public safety issue for patrol officers to handle that, at times, ends tragically.

It's also worth questioning whether the city should plunge full speed ahead rather than look to its developing Community Service Officer program to help ease the pressure. The majority of 911 calls for which police officers are dispatched concern low and medium-priority issues, according

to the city's budget office which analyzed the police bureau's budget request. The Community Service Officer program, funded in last year's budget, was envisioned as a unit of unarmed officers who could handle low-priority calls, such as non-injury traffic crashes and other non-emergency issues. The city could focus additional attention on getting that program running at a lower cost than adding police officers.

And while the mayor proposes adding three analysts to the police bureau for tracking and analyzing use-of-force data and other information, he has yet to recommend funding for a critical position in the city auditor's Independent Police Review division, which investigates police misconduct complaints. A spokesman for the mayor said Wheeler believes the auditor can cover the cost for the senior management analyst through her existing funds, noting that the auditor typically underspends her budget. But insisting that the auditor fund an accountability position from leftovers that may or may not materialize hardly shows the commitment that Wheeler claims to feel for police oversight.

The great thing about Wheeler's proposed budget is that it's just the beginning. It's up to him, city commissioners and the public to get to an ending that will best serve Portlanders.

Expert on Policing and Mental Health Quits Team Hired to Oversee Portland Police Reforms

*By Maxine Bernstein
May 4, 2018*

A national expert on police encounters with people in mental health crisis has resigned from the team of Chicago academics hired by the city to oversee reforms to Portland police stemming from the city's settlement agreement with the federal Justice Department.

Amy Watson sent a brief email announcing her resignation to the city attorney, police chief and U.S. Department of Justice lawyers on April 14, just five days before city officials and federal lawyers returned before a federal judge to update him on the status of reforms.

Part of what prompted Watson's resignation from the city team was a "professional difference of opinion" regarding the team's review of police compliance with Paragraph 99 of the extensive settlement, according to Dennis Rosenbaum, who leads the team. The settlement stemmed from a 2012 federal investigation that found that Portland police used excessive force against people with mental illness.

That paragraph deals with how Portland police respond to mental health-related calls, one of the most critical and central parts of the settlement. It called for the bureau to create a separate team of crisis intervention officers who work together, report to one high-ranking supervisor and respond to most mental health-related calls based on a Memphis model.

Amy Watson's email announcing her resignation from compliance team

Two weeks before the court hearing, the city-hired compliance academic team completed a draft report that gave the Portland police an unusual, but sought-after green rating of "Substantial Compliance," adding a hyphen with the word, "Conditional."

The positive rating came despite that fact that the bureau hadn't adopted new dispatch criteria the compliance team recommended to expand the number of mental-health related calls requiring the dispatch of the bureau's Enhanced Crisis Intervention officers. The bureau's enhanced crisis intervention officers are scattered among the three patrol precincts, report to different supervisors

and have not been dispatched to all mental health calls. The bureau suggested it would create its own expanded dispatch criteria, which hasn't been reviewed yet.

The Chicago-based Rosenbaum & Associates issued a draft of their quarterly report just two weeks before officials from the city and the U.S. Department of Justice are expected to appear April 19 before U.S. District Judge Michael A. Simon for a hearing on the status of required police reforms.

The draft report in April marked a significant change from the compliance team's prior report in December, which gave the bureau a yellow "partial compliance" rating, finding the bureau didn't have the data yet to show whether its Enhanced Crisis Intervention Team of officers is a more effective alternative than the settlement's requested Memphis model.

Rosenbaum acknowledged that the bureau clearly isn't in compliance yet with that section of the settlement agreement, but said the conditional rating was given to "inform future reports."

The rating should be interpreted as, "Should these particular conditions be met, we would recommend Substantial Compliance," Rosenbaum said.

Jo Ann Hardesty, a community activist running for City Council who has monitored the settlement agreement and the city's responses, said she thought Watson was the strongest of the Chicago-based compliance team of academics, and most knowledgeable about mental health issues. She said she's concerned about the timing of Watson's departure.

"I thought she was the most responsive to community concerns," Hardesty said.

Dan Handelman, of the police watchdog group Portland Copwatch, said he believes the team's ratings for the bureau in its April draft report were "far too generous" to the police bureau, and questioned whether that prompted Watson's resignation.

Watson declined to discuss why she resigned. "At this point, I am not in a position to elaborate on this," she said by e-mail.

Rosenbaum wouldn't discuss the matter in more detail, calling it an internal personnel matter for his consulting group "Rosenbaum & Associates," once called "Rosenbaum & Watson."

"We are grateful for her service for more than three years, but she is a very busy person," Rosenbaum said. "Her decision was based in part on a professional difference of opinion on one issue, but in general, all of us were on the same page, and acknowledge that PPB has made significant progress with its response to mental health crises. However, there is still room for improvement."

Lawyers from the U.S. Department of Justice's civil rights division also declined to comment about Watson's departure, calling it an "internal matter" for the city-hired compliance team.

Mayor Ted Wheeler, who serves as police commissioner, was informed by the city attorney of Watson's departure, said Michael Cox, the mayor's spokesman.

"The Mayor appreciates Amy Watson's expertise and wishes her well. The City will continue to work collaboratively with the COCL and DOJ to achieve full compliance under the Settlement Agreement," Cox said. "The mayor is also aware of the reason behind Amy Watson's resignation, but doesn't feel it's his place to share that publicly."

Watson was the lead person on the team of Chicago academics focused on police encounters with people with mental illness. She's a professor at Jane Addams College of Social Work at University of Illinois at Chicago, and has conducted research funded by the National Institute of Mental Health on the experiences of police encounters by people suffering from mental illness.

She has completed several federally funded studies of the Crisis Intervention Team model and is currently studying Chicago's Crisis Intervention Team. Watson also has worked as a probation officer on a specialist mental health team.