

# City government's culture of dismiss and deny in the face of criticism: Editorial Agenda 2017



Portland City Hall (*The Oregonian/OregonLive staff*)



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In December, the city **ombudsman's office released a report** that should have set off alarms for those running Portland's 911 dispatch center. A technological flaw in how cell phone calls are screened meant that the dispatch center never received the phone numbers for thousands of calls that ended because people hung up or were otherwise disconnected before an operator answered. Dispatchers, according to city policy, are supposed to call those hang-ups back to check if there's an emergency, as [The Oregonian/OregonLive's Jessica Floum reported](#).

But rather than respond with the urgency such findings might prompt, Portland's Bureau of Emergency Communications cast an annoyed eye roll. Managers have sought to discredit the report in both their written response and comments to city commissioners. They have disputed the findings that the 911 center lacked phone number information for **more than 18,000 such "abandoned" calls in 2015** - even though those figures came straight from their own data. They've quibbled over meaningless semantic distinctions. And they downplayed the severity of the problem by claiming those calls were inadvertent, a conclusion based more on assumptions than any actual analysis.

This isn't good enough for any city bureau, let alone one tasked with handling life-and-death emergency calls. But the impulse to wave off red flags points to a cultural problem in Portland city government as a whole: When confronted with evidence of mismanagement or flawed processes, bureau leaders immediately resort to a strategy of dismiss, deny and deflect.

For example, consider Portland Housing Bureau director Kurt Creager's recent comments in a **story by The Oregonian/OregonLive's Brad Schmidt** on the city's new program to help fund repairs to low-income apartments in East Portland. In seeking city money for the program, housing bureau officials gave city leaders unsubstantiated numbers of how many apartment buildings needed repairs. Worse, their guess kept growing over time. When Schmidt established in short order that the real estimate was less than half the most recent number provided by the housing bureau, Creager told him: "Maybe you have more time than we do."

And consider City Commissioner Amanda Fritz's response to a city audit last year that was **highly critical of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement** for inadequate oversight of its grants, a lack of strategic planning and questionable funding decisions. Fritz, who oversaw the office until this year, devoted much of her written comments to praising the office and blaming inadequate funding for shortcomings.

Such defensiveness has no place in an organization that strives for professionalism. Honest assessments, no matter how critical, ultimately help it fulfill its mission.

Unfortunately, the 911 center is showing the same prickly attitude toward Ombudsman Margie Sollinger's December 2016 report that revealed technological flaws in how the 911 center handles cell phone calls. Unlike people who dial 911 from landlines, cell phone callers must press a number or make a noise to get through a program meant to screen out accidental "pocket dials." Their calls are then placed in a queue for dispatchers to answer.

The problem is that if someone hangs up before talking with someone, their phone information is lost. Dispatchers not only can't call them back, they don't even know someone had called in, Sollinger found.

The center's operations manager, Lisa St. Helen, admitted in an email to Sollinger last year that she didn't previously know of the problem. But there's been little formal acknowledgement of that. Instead, the bureau has been downplaying the findings by assuring them that if there were a widespread problem with the screening system, more people would have complained by now.

There may be truth to that, but it's hard to know. They haven't done any testing of their theory beyond checking how many complaints they've had. While they've changed their recorded messages to alert callers to remain on the line, the main plan is to wait for installation of a new system that they believe may fix the problem. As the ombudsman recommended, city commissioners should insist that 911 managers get their approval before implementing a new system so they can ensure that any screening system works properly.

This is not an academic exercise. The 911 center should remember what prompted Sollinger's inquiry in the first place. In May 2016, a Southeast Portland resident complained that she had dialed the dispatch center to report that her neighbor's house was on fire. She hung up after waiting unsuccessfully for a dispatcher to answer for more than two minutes. No one called her back. Calls from others reporting the fire did get through.

In downplaying Sollinger's report, St. Helen noted to commissioners that "you can't quantify what you don't know." When it comes to public safety, however, that should not be a pass for saying "why bother?"

- *The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board*