

Portlanders Question Police Priorities As 911 Response Times Lag

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by Alex Zielinski • Dec 17, 2020 at 9:28 am

[Editor's note: This article mentions sexual assault.]

It wasn't long after a gray RV appeared in her North Portland neighborhood's cul-de-sac that Erica knew something was off.

It was the vehicle's appearance that first raised suspicion: The RV was missing its license plates and, in place of traditional door locks and handles, the owners had installed screws to keep the doors secure. Then Erica began waking up to late-night activity at the vehicle—people in luxury cars were parking on the street, entering the RV for no more than 15 minutes, and then driving off. During each visit, individuals carrying guns would appear to stand guard outside the RV.

Erica, who asked the *Mercury* to use a pseudonym to protect her from retribution, guessed the vehicle was being used to sell hard drugs, or even as a portable drug manufacturing lab. Either way, she believed it was putting her street at risk—and her neighbors agreed. In early November, Erica called the Portland Police Bureau's (PPB) non-emergency number to make a report and was given the cell phone number of an officer whom she could call the next time she saw activity at the RV.

But when she called a few nights later, the officer never answered the phone or responded to her voicemail. The same thing happened the next night, and the next. The officer never replied to her calls, so Erica resorted to calling 911. An operator said they'd send an officer to meet her—but no one ever showed up. Her neighbors also called 911, hoping for a different response. No one came.

Erica's experience is one of many similar situations Portlanders have encountered in the past several months, as PPB's responses to 911 calls have become increasingly unreliable.

Portlanders who spoke to the *Mercury* described waiting hours—if not days—to hear back from PPB after making 911 calls including domestic abuse and stalking. And when officers did respond, callers said they've heard excuses that felt inappropriate, if not politically charged.

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In her multiple attempts to have an officer investigate the RV on her street, Erica said two different officers blamed the delay specifically on “Black Lives Matter protests” and Portland City Council’s budget cuts to the police bureau.

These excuses rang hollow to Erica. To explain why, she pointed to the frequent police patrols at a homeless encampment near her home.

“They clearly make time to harass people for being homeless,” Erica said. “Their priorities don’t seem to make sense. If you want to gain public respect, you have to show your value... and they really aren’t showing their value.”

PPB says the slow response times are due to a combination of staffing shortages, training delays, and officers being taken off of patrol to respond to Portland’s ongoing racial justice demonstrations against police violence.

As of early December, only 290 of PPB’s 603 sworn officers were assigned to patrol, meaning they could respond to 911 calls. The other 394 officers were tied up with special investigations, on leave, on desk duty, or in training, which has been delayed due to COVID-19 restrictions. The bureau also had 52 vacant positions after a surge of summer retirements.

This has left the bureau stretched precariously thin, according to PPB spokesperson Kevin Allen.

“We are at a place where our call load and resources sometimes do not allow us to respond to a request in the amount of time that is reasonable,” said Allen. “People are dialing the phone, calling 911, and we’re not able to respond right away. That’s really frustrating.”

When a 911 call necessitates an officer response, PPB tries to dispatch officers who are closest in vicinity to the caller. But Allen said it’s become increasingly common for nearby police to already be responding to a report, meaning the dispatched officer might have to drive across town to reach the scene. When officers arrive, Allen said, they’re usually asked what took so long.

“We have to explain that eight patrol are tied up responding to a crash across town, or that there’s a protest blocking streets,” he said. “And it’s no secret that some of the civil unrest has taken up those resources. All we can do is sympathize with folks. They’re paying for police services with tax money, and we aren’t there when they need us.”

Data collected by the city reflect these recent response time delays. In October, the city’s 911 call center answered more than 40,800 calls to 911, while PPB reports dispatching officers to only 19,800 of them—or, 49 percent of all calls. **[Editor’s note: This article originally stated incorrectly that PPB was dispatching officers to 39 percent of calls, rather than 49 percent. The Mercury regrets the error.]**

While many calls don't require an in-person response by a police officer, this gap is larger than those in past years. In October 2019, officers responded to 55 percent of all 911 calls. In October 2018, that number was at 59 percent. Part of this can be attributed to the number of available patrol officers at the time. PPB had around 80 more officers on patrol in 2018, and 60 more in 2019.

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This growing problem has created a rift between PPB officers and 911 call center operators, who are overseen by the city's Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC). If officers don't show up after a 911 call, it's the phone operators who must answer to the increasingly frustrated callers expecting a response.

Dana, a BOEC employee who's worked at the call center for five years, said officers are expected to respond to “calls in progress” within an hour. (Dana asked the *Mercury* to remain anonymous because they're not authorized to speak on behalf of BOEC, so we've identified them with a pseudonym.)

Those “calls in progress,” which operators report into a computerized dispatch system shared with patrol officers, can include someone breaking into a house while the resident is home or someone actively being assaulted. Since early summer, Dana said, those calls have sometimes been ignored by officers for an entire 12-hour shift.

“People call us back and ask, ‘Where's the officer?’” said Dana. “And we aren't able to give them an ETA.”

Dana often returns to unaddressed reports on a call in progress to add more data, sometimes noting additional (and factual) information like “person has gun” to make them more compelling to officers. They said it helps sometimes.

Dana said they first noticed a change in officers' response times on the heels of Portland City Council's June decision to cut \$15 million from the PPB's requested budget, a decision made in response to Portland's massive protests against police brutality.

“I think their lack of response is retaliation for that,” said Dana. “Police officers have been telling [City Council] that we don't have resources to respond. But I'm looking at the dispatch screen and I see officers not on calls. Or I see an officer saying they're responding to a low priority call, but their patrol car GPS shows them at a Starbucks for 3 hours. It doesn't add up.”

Dana has watched many low priority calls, such as reports of a week-old assault, a missing car, or a welfare check, simply be cleared from the dispatch list by PPB at the end of a shift, without explanation. That means when the initial caller calls back to follow up on their report, there's no record of it in the system—and the whole process starts over again.

“It's frustrating,” said Dana. “You get this job because you want to help someone, and I don't feel like I'm helping people.”

PPB's Allen said that when officers aren't able to respond to a call where someone had requested an officer's presence, that officer is expected to contact that person to explain before the end of their shift.

“Someone is supposed to call and let them know, ‘Hey, we're really tied up,’ and let them know about delay,” he said.

In other situations, Allen said, officers might cancel a call without a formal investigation. For example, he said, “Maybe someone called to report that someone is yelling in the street. But maybe an officer drove through the intersection and didn't see anyone, so marked it as resolved.”

Dana said these explanations are rarely noted by officers, leaving operators not knowing how—or if—a call was truly resolved.

BOEC Director Bob Cozzie said he empathizes with this growing frustration among his staff. Like PPB, BOEC has been forced to delay training for new hires due to COVID-19, meaning the number of employees able to answer calls is lacking. Cozzie said PPB's delay in responding to 911 calls creates additional work for his short-staffed operators.

“In some cases, we're getting multiple calls from the same people, asking where the officer is,” Cozzie said. “I hear from my staff that it happens much, much more frequently. That takes up time we could be responding to other calls.”

In November, Mayor Ted Wheeler sent a memo to both BOEC and PPB, requesting more information on how the 911 response system operated.

“I am increasingly concerned that priority calls are taking too long to receive a response and that some calls may not be responded to at all, leaving community members without adequate public safety services in Portland,” Wheeler wrote.

Wheeler specifically requested data on how many 911 calls requesting a police response never receive one, and how officers prioritize their responses. The answers will likely inform Wheeler's proposed city budget for 2021, which includes funding recommendations for each city bureau. Both Cozzie and Allen said they welcome the conversation, and plan on sending their responses to Wheeler in the coming months.

“It’s admirable that he’s taking it on and looking for solutions,” said Allen.

In the meantime, PPB Chief Chuck Lovell has announced he’ll be restructuring some internal departments to free up more officers to respond to 911 calls. By March, Lovell expects to have at least 70 more officers assigned to patrol positions, boosting the total number of patrol officers to to 360—surpassing 2019 patrol numbers.

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While these delayed responses from PPB may begin with 911 calls, they’ve also begun impacting officers’ ability to swiftly investigate a reported crime.

In late September, Jennifer Neitling said she was drugged and sexually assaulted at her Portland home by her roommate’s family member. After fleeing the house, she called 911 to report the incident. Neitling said two officers responded quickly, and accompanied her to a hospital to collect a rape kit.

Neitling checked in on her case the following day, expecting an arrest. According to Neitling, the man who assaulted her was on parole for sexually abusing a minor at the time, a factor that Neitling assumed would encourage PPB to act with urgency. Instead, Neitling was told it could take up to two months for an officer to even be assigned to her case to begin an investigation. She wouldn’t let that stand.

Neitling, who is currently unemployed due to COVID-19 layoffs, spent a week calling every PPB number she could find, but received the same response from every officer on the other line.

“Every single person I talked to said that they are having the worst staffing crisis right now, and are in the middle of really bad protests,” she said.

To Neitling, who had been following the local protests, these explanations laid bare PPB’s priorities.

“It’s frustrating to hear,” she said. “The police are supposed to protect you... but instead they’re spending time hurting people on the street protesting? That’s more important than responding to violent crimes?”

Neitling tried to find other ways to accelerate the case. She filed a report with the city ombudsman against the PPB, emailed city commissioners, and even called her alleged abuser’s parole officer.

In an email response to City Ombudsman Margie Sollinger, who shared Neitling's complaint with PPB, Commander Jeff Bell confirmed that it could take up to two months for some cases to be assigned to an officer, but that cases like Neitling's always elicited a swifter response.

In the email, obtained by the *Mercury* through a records request, Bell explained that less urgent cases had been delayed because of a lack of available detectives, due to PPB's commitment to nightly protest coverage.

"Detectives... have been tasked with supporting crowd control efforts by processing arrests at night," Bell wrote, which means fewer detectives are able to work the day shifts. Bell said he hoped this wouldn't be the case for much longer.

Eventually, Neitling sent a longshot Facebook message to her elementary school campus cop—now a retired PPB officer—asking for help. It worked. He made a few calls and, within two weeks, Neitling had an officer investigating her assault. But she knows this victory only reflects her privilege.

"Luckily, I had the spare time and resources to commit to this," she said. "I think if I was younger and not white, and busy with work, there's no way I'd get any movement in this case. I know there are vulnerable people falling through the cracks."

"If nobody is going to come, we have to know how to take care of ourselves."

For Erica, PPB's perceived disregard of her 911 calls emboldened her to take the issue into her own hands. After weeks of silence from PPB regarding her neighborhood's suspected drug dealing hub, Erica said she came to an uncomfortable conclusion.

"That's when I realized, we're on our own," she said. "There's not going to be anyone that answers our calls."

In lieu of police intervention, Erica and her neighbors eventually teamed up to confront the armed man who appeared to own the vehicle. They told him that they had called the police, and the man immediately got in the vehicle and drove away. Erica hasn't seen the RV since. But she knows it could have ended differently.

"I'm anti-gun, but you know, that is changing now," she said. "If nobody is going to come, we have to know how to take care of ourselves."