

The Oregonian

Community Distrusts Portland Police; Police Say Community Doesn't Understand Their Jobs

*By Maxine Bernstein
March 20, 2019*

Community members, particularly minorities, are distrustful of Portland police. They don't believe the Portland Police Bureau is well-managed or does an effective job reducing crime in the city.

Most officers believe the community doesn't understand the job of a cop. They feel there's a disconnect with City Hall and that the mayor is more swayed by politics than what's best for the police bureau. They doubt change is possible in the bureau

The community's and officers' views on the state of policing in Portland, gauged through online surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews done by consultants between June and November 2018, are outlined in a new report released late Tuesday.

Corragio Group, a local consulting firm, held focus groups with a total of about 165 people, 35 interviews with city officials, police staff, city commissioners and members of the Independent Police Review division, surveyed about 3,100 residents online and held three public meetings.

The information is intended to help the bureau develop a five-year strategic plan.

Community members want police to drop what they perceive as an "us versus them" mentality on the job and be more effective following up with victims of crime. Communities of color feel police enforce laws selectively based on race.

Local residents surveyed seek a consistent and visible police presence, where officers take time to get out of their cars, do more foot patrols and build real relationships in the neighborhoods they serve.

Ninety-five percent of officers surveyed say they're less willing to stop and question people who seem suspicious because they're worried about how their actions will be reviewed and investigated.

Among the study's other findings of those surveyed or interviewed:

--79 percent of community members surveyed believe the Police Bureau only sometimes, rarely or never does a good job at reducing or preventing crimes in Portland.

"The PPB needs to understand that sometimes quality of life crimes, such as vandalism, the defacement of public property, illegal homeless camps on public property, auto theft and vandalism, are the most important in gaining the trust of the public and its cooperation," one community member wrote.

--67 percent of community members feel police response times to emergency calls need to improve.

--63 percent of community members surveyed believe that having a police Enhanced Crisis Intervention Team officer respond to a call involving someone in a mental health crisis is useful toward resolving the situation. The Enhanced Crisis Intervention Team officers receive additional training beyond the 40-hours of crisis intervention training that all officers are required to complete.

--92 percent of officers believe effectively responding to mental health calls is a priority for the police bureau.

--Community members appreciate the risks officers face every day in serving their communities and understand that isolated poor performance should not characterize the broader organization. But most – or 91 percent - of officers surveyed believe that the public doesn't understand what it means to be a cop.

--71 percent of community members surveyed indicate that they don't have a high level of trust with the Police Bureau. This lack of trust grows in communities of color to 85% of black residents surveyed who lack trust in police, 87% in Asian communities, 77% in multi-ethnic communities and 75% in Native American communities.

--75 percent of community members would welcome a more relationship-based approach to policing.

--49 percent of officers are afraid to blow the whistle on things they find wrong within the agency.

--Nearly half, or 46 percent of the sworn officers are skeptical that change is possible in the police bureau.

--71 percent of the community respondents are unsure or disagree that the police bureau is well managed by professional leaders.

--Most police staff don't think the bureau's leaders communicate effectively with the media and public.

--56 percent of officers don't think the bureau's goals are clear ,and say their leadership doesn't set clear expectations.

--75 percent of bureau staff feel they have too much work to do and that prevents proactive policing.

--Some officers believe that important trainings on shoot/don't shoot scenarios and less-lethal force have taken a back seat to de-escalation, mental health and implicit bias training due to political and community pressures, while community members believe additional training hours should be spent on the latter topics.

--More than half of officers feel burnt out, frustrated and emotionally exhausted by work.

--76 percent of officers believe the bureau's Employee Information System is ineffective in identifying officers at risk of getting into trouble.

--Over half of police civilian staff questioned feel their work is not appreciated as much as the work of sworn officers.

--At times, the public's perception of the Police Bureau can be discouraging for officers as many believe they give more than they get back on the job. Many understand they're in a service-oriented job, but at times say it can seem thankless.

Portland Homeless Camps Clean-up Program Needs Improving, Auditors Say

By Gordon Friedman

March 20, 2019

Managers of Portland's program for finding and cleaning up homeless camps need to do a better job, city auditors concluded in a report published Wednesday.

They need to better communicate with people who report camps and with those who live in them, the audit found. Camps need to be strategically prioritized for clean up, it said. And tents, ID cards, credit cards and other property confiscated from illegal camp sites needs to be better catalogued and stored and more readily returned to its owners, the audit said.

The clean-up program, which costs \$3.6 million a year, does a satisfactory job of finding and cleaning Portland's many homeless camps, auditors concluded after interviews with program workers, field observations and document reviews.

For example, they found crews removed more than 2.6 million pounds of garbage from area camps in fiscal 2017 and are usually polite to people they are booting from illegal campsites. But auditors also found much room to improve.

Since 2015, Portland has had a streamlined system, called One Point of Contact, that allows people to notify officials of illegal campsites. Contracted crews subsequently remove tents, garbage and other items from some of the sites that get reported and store campers' seized belongings.

The audit, conducted when during summer and fall 2018, found that residents say they appreciate having a one-stop-shop for complaints about homeless people and camps, but frequent users say they find the pace too sluggish.

Users of the system also complain they are not notified when camps they report are put on the clean-up list or actually dealt with. The city says it will fix this.

When officials created the One Point of Contact system, they said the database would allow complaints of camps to be prioritized for clean-up. Crews were to visit each site to judge it on biohazards, garbage and other factors, such as whether campers are aggressive or openly using drugs.

But auditors said they found little evidence that such prioritizing occurred nor what criteria were invoked when deciding which camp to tackle next or leave alone.

Auditors also found the city frequently ignores hundreds of residents' complaints. The week of June 4, 2018, for example, the city received 680 complaints about homeless camps but never followed up on them in 254 cases, auditors concluded.

That non-response doesn't comport with the crackdown on illegal camping instituted by Mayor Ted Wheeler earlier in his term.

"There's nowhere trash is acceptable. There's nowhere needles are acceptable. There's nowhere graffiti on public right of ways are acceptable," Wheeler said in 2017.

The clean-up crews are supposed to give occupants of tents and tarps 10 days' notice to pack up their stuff and move on before a sweep. The crews dismantle any structures left behind, lay items on the ground, photograph and document them, then either throw items in the trash or take them to storage.

But homeless people interviewed by auditors complained they are not given time to pack their things and have trouble retrieving confiscated property. And the imprecise 10-day window leaves many feeling anxious a sweep could come at any moment.

Homeless people and advocates say that retrieving items from a single storage location – a warehouse in Southeast Portland – is not easy for people without cars.

And homeless people reported to auditors that they sometimes gave up on trying to get their property back because crews at the city warehouse took so long time find it. The city also did not store valuables such as IDs, credit cards and prescription medications separately from shelves full of blankets, tent parts and other property.

Officials have since instituted a separate filing system for those items, the audit said.

Auditors found a deep divide among Portlanders over camp removals. On one hand, many found the so-called camps “sweeps” to be harsh. On the other, people said illegal camping should never be tolerated.

“We had extremes from, ‘You're harassing people, you should leave them alone,’ to the polar opposite, which essentially was, ‘Arrest these people,’” said lead auditor Kristine Adams-Wannberg.

Wheeler and Chief Administrative Officer Tom Rinehart responded to the audit with a letter saying they will follow through on auditors’ recommendations and have already begun making reforms.

Camping on public property is illegal in Portland. Auditors noted that Wheeler’s administration has allowed homeless people to break those laws while the city works to find people housing. Adams-Wannberg said auditors did not probe Wheeler’s decision to let the law go unenforced.

The Portland Tribune

Audit: Homeless Cleanups Need Better Management

*By Jim Redden
March 20, 2019*

The audit is released just two days after BikePortland declares obstructions caused by homeless camps along I-205 path 'unacceptable.'

A temporary Portland program to clean up homeless camps has grown into a \$3.6 million-a-year operation that needs better management, according to a new city audit.

The audit released Wednesday said increasing demand for services has pushed the program past its capacity. Among other things, the program needs to do a better job collecting data and communicating with residents who make complaints and homeless people in camps to be cleaned up.

The audit was released just two days after BikePortland, an influential bike advocacy organization, declared obstructions caused by homeless camps along the I-205 bike and pedestrian path to be 'unacceptable.'

"For years now, bicycle riders have had to deal with this situation. It's one thing when people live near the path. However, it's another thing entirely when people live on the path," founder

Jonathan Maus wrote on the organization's well-read blog, which included video he recently took biking along the debris-strewn path.

You can find [the BikePortland post here](#).

The Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program was created in 2015 as the City Council was first beginning to increase homeless services and funding in response to the affordable housing crisis. It provides a single source of contact for resident to report homeless camps that need to be cleaned up, among other services — known as the One Point of Contact reporting system.

"The program has had some success. Cleanups have improved living conditions for people in camps, and the program has made it easier for the public to report camps," said the audit released by the City Auditors Office titled "Cleanups of Homeless Camps: Improved Communications and Data Needed."

But, according to the audit, complaint collection, tracking and responses have not kept up with increases in volume over the past three-plus years. Among other things, the audit found cleanups are not adequately prioritized, and the time required to finish them is not being tracked.

"Its reliance on email, forms, and separate

spreadsheets should give way to a comprehensive data system to enable complaint tracking, status updates, risk assessments, and cleanup prioritization. The program also should improve communication with the community, both people reporting the camps to the City and those living in the camps," the audit said.

The program also dispatches crews to clean up homeless camps where health and safety issues are identified. Although light trash cleanup does not disperse campers, more extensive cleanups require them to leave the camps.

In such cases, the city must store possessions left behind for 30 days under the terms of a court settlement. Some homeless people said it was difficult to retrieve them.

The audit found the program estimated it removed 2.6 million pounds of garbage from campsites during the 2017-2018 fiscal year alone.

The audit found cleanup crews treated campers with respect, but that some campers wanted more information. Likewise, those making complaints appreciated the simplicity of filing reports, but wanted to be updated about cleanup efforts.

"People who reported a camp and expected a cleanup were dissatisfied when the response was slow or lacking. About 37 percent of respondents said their complaint was not addressed," the audit said.

The audit made several recommendations for better tracking complaints and responses, including using data "to analyze and improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and timeliness of cleanups."

Mayor Ted Wheeler thanked the auditors office for its work and said many of the recommendations are already being implemented.

"We appreciate your office's work to help HUCIRP improve its program on behalf of the City of Portland. The objective lens with which your office examines City services provides the public and our programs valuable insights and feedback. We would like to specifically thank your staff who observed City vendors' interactions with individuals experiencing homelessness, and for reporting that those interactions were respectful," Wheeler said in a response letter.

You can read [the audit here](#).

Pipe Breaks Hard to Predict

By Jim Redden

March 20, 2019

Sudden burst of century-old pipe flooded neighborhood, and city officials say such breaks are hard to predict and prevent.

The cast iron water main that ruptured spectacularly in Northeast Portland on Saturday was more than 100 years old.

Despite that, Portland Water Bureau officials could not predict the failure. The 30-inch diameter pipe was buried under a quiet, narrow residential street with no obvious risk factors, like the weight of a TriMet bus line on the street. Nor were there any apparent leaks before millions of gallons of water suddenly burst through the pavement and flooded the neighborhood.

"Age isn't necessarily an indicator of condition. The rest of the main was in otherwise good shape," said Water Bureau Maintenance and Construction Director Ty Kovatch.

According to Kovatch, recent utility work in the area could have disturbed the soil where the pipe had rested since 1915. That, combined with this winter's freezes and thaws, could have contributed to the break. But there is no way to know for sure.

About 36 hours after the failure, the broken section of the pipe had been pulled from the street and was lying against the curb. A four-foot by two-foot hole in the pipe demonstrated the power of the water that broke it. The replacement pipe that arrived Sunday afternoon already had been secured in place, setting the stage for the Portland Bureau of Transportation to begin rebuilding and paving the heavily damaged section of Northeast Skidmore Street between 23rd and 24th avenues. That work could take two weeks.

More than 2,260 miles of water pipes run through Portland, most under city streets, where they are hard to reach and expensive to repair. They are valued at more than \$10 billion. Replacing all of them that reach a certain age would be prohibitively expensive, requiring an unacceptable increase in water rates, officials say.

Although the pipe that broke was one of the oldest in the distribution system, it is not alone. The oldest date back to 1895. More than half are more than 50 years old. And many others are in locations where future breaks seem more likely, like under train lines, frequent bus lines and near the many major construction projects underway in many parts of the city.

The water bureau adopted a formal Asset Management Plan in 2004 to help prioritize all of its maintenance and replacement projects. But the goal is to spend maintenance and repair funds as efficiently as possible, not to predict and prevent every breakdown, which is impossible. Around 200 mains break and are fixed each year, typically from fall through spring. Breaks in a 30-inch main are highly unusual.

"This was a very rare event and the largest main break we've dealt with," Kovatch said. "Thank you to everyone who was affected for their patience as our crews conducted repair work."

Pipes like water mains are prioritized as "consequential pipes." But many are considered at greater risk than the one that broke, including "pipes crossing under high-traffic roads and major railroad lines, pipes on bridges that cross major roads and railroad lines or water bodies, pipes

that provide connections to critical customers, vulnerable or deteriorated conduit sections, pipes in areas with high potential for landslides."

Although the break damaged some nearby homes, some previous floods have been more serious. For example, in 1985, the failure of a pipe on a bridge owned by a railroad scoured away a significant portion of the adjacent slope along Willamette Boulevard. And in 2010, a pipe crossing McLoughlin Boulevard failed, causing major traffic disruptions. Both had costs exceeding \$1 million.

That is not much consolation for the Northeast Portland residents whose property was damaged or destroyed by the break, however. Some may file claims against the city to recover their losses.

Margaret Kennedy's house was right in the middle of Saturday's raging torrent of water. She spent much of Sunday cleaning up debris, mostly her neighbor's landscaping rocks that had been pushed into her yard.

"Oh my god, it looked like Old Faithful up the street," Kennedy said. "And then it looked like a waterfall coming down."

City Hall Staffer Berk Nelson to Lobby for Umpqua Bank

By Zane Sparling

March 20, 2019

Nelson was a senior policy advisor on homelessness and police for Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler.

A top staffer at City Hall has taken a new job as a lobbyist for a bank with billions in the vault.

Berk Nelson — who served as Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler's senior policy advisor on law enforcement and homelessness — will now work as vice president of government relations for Umpqua Bank, according to his LinkedIn page.

Nelson has advised the mayor since January, 2017, and was a key player in the relocation of organized homeless village Right 2 Dream Too from downtown to the east bank of the Willamette River near the Moda Center.

More recently, Nelson was the conduit when Portlanders learned that the Multnomah County District Attorney's office had apparently erroneously advised the Portland Police Bureau not to arrest street protesters engaged in "mutual combat," which is in fact illegal.

The news, as reported by Willamette Week, led to clarifications by Nelson that prosecutors were referring more generally to the concept of self defense. At a March 11 press conference, Nelson said demonstrators caught on camera throwing blows can always argue the other side was the aggressor.

Now, that's all behind him.

"This has been one of the most rewarding experiences for me because I have gained immeasurable insight into how government serves the community," Nelson said in a statement announcing his departure. "I am grateful to the mayor for giving me this opportunity."

Nelson was involved in examining alternatives to the first responders rushing toward non-emergency police calls. He also liaised with Multnomah County on mental health issues.

Wheeler says he'll remember his former counselor fondly. "He brought a wealth of intelligence and ideas to this challenging position. I have been lucky to have such a talented, hardworking advisor over the last two years," the mayor noted.

Nelson's last day was Friday, March 15.

The Portland Mercury

Report Shows Concerning Divide Between Portland Cops and the Public

*By Alex Zielinski
March 20, 2019*

The Portland Police Bureau's relationship with the public is fraught.

For those who've been following the recent community meetings, tense city hall press conferences, and numerous fatal encounters with Portland officers, this should come as no surprise.

However, the city now has numbers to support this assumption.

On Tuesday, the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) released a 52-page document outlining the public and police officer perceptions of the PPB's role in Portland, based on a series of surveys, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and public meetings. The report, conducted by an outside consultant, was created to inform the police bureau's five-year strategic plan—a new roadmap for the bureau that PPB's expected to release sometime before May. Here are the major takeaways from the wide-reaching report:

Communities of color deeply distrust Portland police:

A whopping 73 percent of all community members surveyed believe that the PPB "considers race and ethnicity when enforcing the law." Eighty-five percent of African Americans who were surveyed believe PPB policies are only fair and effective sometimes, if at all.

Twenty five percent of African American surveyed feel "comfortable and safe" interacting with Portland officers. And 38 percent of surveyed African Americans "do not trust the police at all." That number grows to 45 percent among American Indian Portlanders surveyed.

Even those inside the police department believe race plays a discriminatory role in their job—the report found that 48 percent of surveyed officers believe race influences the way an employee is treated.

Police aren't able to genuinely engage with members of the public:

Due to a perceived (and real) challenge to recruit new police officers to fill vacant positions, Portland officers don't feel like they are able to adequately meet the public's community engagement standards—like attending community meetings or introducing themselves to neighbors in their service area. According to the report, 84 percent of community members say their experience with PPB officers participating in "authentic community engagement" is limited. And what little exists seems forced.

The report includes this unattributed quote from a surveyed community member: "Community engagement in Portland is a public relations effort, not a priority. It's not authentic. You have to listen."

Community members noted that police officers' "militarized appearance" dissuades the public from interacting with officers in more casual settings. The report identified that, among community members, the "top barrier" to creating an effective police force is excessive use of force.

The system in which PPB operates undermines progress and accountability:

Only half of PPB officers say they are not afraid to hold their organization accountable. (The other half is unsure or disagrees.) And 46 percent of surveyed officers believe "change is not possible at PPB."

The public can sense this vague unease. "The community believes accountability in the PPB is lacking, demonstrated by a perception of tolerance for bias and racism, past union decisions, and a lack of transparency in disciplinary action and decision making," the report reads.

Police are unclear about the role they're expected to play in Portland:

Thirty percent of PPB officers surveyed found the bureau's "organizational goals unclear. "Interpretation of certain policies and procedures varies across leadership," the report reads.

Out of caution, it appears officers are simply avoiding confrontation that could clash with bureau policies or take them to court. Some 95 percent of all officers are "less willing to stop and question people who seem suspicious," because of the negative public perception around local policing.

Analysts say this could be linked to unstable or unsupportive leadership within the bureau. "Leadership consistency - their vision, their focus, their voice - has a tremendous impact on the effectiveness of organizational operations," the report reads.

Politics get in the way of meaningful reform:

"PPB and city leadership, as it relates to Police Bureau issues, are seen as making decisions based on the best interests of politics, rather than the best interest of the PPB and Portland's community members," reads the report.

Analysts use Portland's houseless crisis to illustrate this problem. "Without the political will to comprehensively address Portland's houseless crisis, the PPB will continue to serve as first responders to Portland's houseless community," the report reads. "This role as first responder requires a different skill set than is currently recruited and trained for."

Officers also see politics taking a role in the basic training they receive. "Some officers believe that important trainings on shoot/don't shoot scenarios and non-lethal force have taken a back seat to de-escalation, mental health and implicit bias training due to political and community pressures."

While officers say they see value in these prioritized trainings, they're worried that they won't be prepared for basic, but critical, scenarios.

The report also points to growing tensions between the police bureau and mayor's office, which is often amplified by statements made by the Portland Police Association, PPB's union.

"There is a perceived conflict of interest given the city's leadership structure and the Mayor's position as the [Police] Commissioner," the report finds. "Even when the community and PPB

staff align on changes, the labor union can, at times, undermine these changes, limiting the ability for progress in certain areas."

Police aren't receiving crucial behavior health care:

Over half of PPB officers surveyed said that they are "burnt out, frustrated, and emotionally exhausted" by their work. Few feel comfortable talking about it with their supervisor, though.

"The internal culture at PPB is not aligned with effective officer wellness and wellness is not prioritized," the report finds "Some officers and professional staff believe that there is a stigma against coming forward with wellness concerns."

Community members aren't thrilled local cops—who are often the first called to respond to a mental health crisis—aren't getting the mental health care they need.

A quote from an unnamed community members: "Officers also need ongoing and compulsory mental health care for themselves as members of an inherently stressful workplace."

The public sees police as as the "other"—and vice-versa:

Portland police are considered community "outsiders" by 71 percent of the surveyed community members. (Technically, this is true. Only 18 percent of Portland police live within the city's limits). The majority of the community believes that the PPB don't always have "the best interest of the communities they serve in mind."

PPB officers feel equally misunderstood. Ninety-one percent of surveyed officers don't believe the public understands "what it means to be a cop."

The Portland Observer

It Looked Like a River

By Danny Peterson

March 19, 2019

Burst water main sees swift repair

A major supply water main break sent a geyser of water gushing into the middle of a residential street in northeast Portland Saturday, inundating the street and several others in the Alberta district with a wall of water, flooding nearly a dozen residential basements and leading to power outage impacting more than 10,000 customers.

The catastrophic failure was to a section of 30-inch cast iron pipe dating to 1915, causing a gaping hole in the line which was finally replaced by city workers on Monday near the corner of Northeast Skidmore and 23rd Avenue.

"The new pipe's in, it's been buried," Portland Water Bureau spokesperson Tony Andersen told the Portland Observer. "We thank the neighborhood and our city partners for their help and their collaboration and we appreciate everyone's patience," he added.

Water Bureau Maintenance and Construction Director Ty Kovatch said city crews respond to about 200 main breaks a year, but called this latest one "a very rare event and the largest main break we've dealt with."

Andersen said there's not a determination yet as to the cause of the break. The age of the pipe along with the added pressure on pipes from the thawing of frozen ground by warming temperatures and the impacts from new construction in the area, are the top hypotheses.

When the pipe broke, it caused a four-to-five foot tall geyser to burst at about 11:30 a.m. Saturday. An estimated rate of a million gallons of water per minute flooded nearby homes and businesses for several blocks; from Skidmore Street to Northeast Albert Street and on Alberta Street from Northeast 25th Avenue to Northeast 31st Avenue.

"It looked like the Deschutes River right here," said Kevin Hendrickson, whose home was about 100 feet from the break. "I am amazed they succeeded at replacing that pipe that fast."

"It was amazing how quickly people responded on the scene and how the neighbors all came together," added Geoff Knapp, another neighbor whose house was about two blocks from the break, but which didn't receive water damage. He added that it was "extraordinary" to have seen crew work overnight to get the repair done in a matter of days.

The repair was the culmination of what amounted to a day and a half of around the clock work from Portland Water Bureau crew, Andersen said.

A city of Portland construction crew on Monday fills a whole left in the street caused by a broken water main, a major supply line that caused flooding, evacuations and a power outage of over 10,000 homes. Portland Water Bureau crew worked around the clock from when the pipe burst Saturday morning until a replacement was set and buried Monday morning.

By late Saturday afternoon, PWB successfully reduced the water flow enough to start making repairs. From 10 p.m. Sunday night to 7 a.m. Monday morning, they successfully replaced the faulty pipe.

The Portland Bureau of Transportation is expected to complete their repairs of the affected street in one to two weeks, officials said. Until then, it's advised to avoid the area as crews conduct their work. In addition, the tap water of the area is okay to drink, but people should wait until the discolored water runs clear, advises Multnomah County.

In addition to the flooding, which saw firefighters carrying people on their backs through ankle-deep water so people could reach their vehicles or traverse flooded areas, a power shutdown also occurred as a safety precaution. From the early afternoon Saturday to about 7 p.m. about 10,000 affected customers of Pacific Power were without electricity in northeast Portland. About 10 homes which had equipment damaged by flooding did not have their electricity restored until later.

At Waffle Window on Alberta Street, one of the areas impacted, the peak lunch rush for a sunny weekend day became something out of a bad stress dream about work, manager Jordan Nidig told the Portland Observer.

"I was in the back and my cashier girl up here, she started screaming. She said it looked like a wall of water heading down the street... I kind of like brought everyone inside, barred the door," Nidig said.

Thankfully for him, the business was on a few steps up, so no water seeped in. Customers were evacuated out the back door.

Neighboring businesses weren't so lucky. Crew at the Thai Noon Restaurant said water entered their store and they had to mop it up, but it didn't cause any damage.

Water was two to three inches deep at Akasaru Ramen, its co-owner Soyoung Chon told the Portland Observer. There, it crept behind their front register, into the kitchen. Luckily their perishable food and building in general was spared of any water damage, though she said they were hit with a monetary loss from having to close up shop for several hours.

OPB

Audit Calls for More Organization of Portland Homeless Camp Clean-Up Program

By Meerah Powell

March 20, 2019

Portland's auditor released a review Wednesday of the Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program — the city program that cleans up homeless camps.

The audit calls for more organization, clarification and communication to prevent people who are homeless from losing personal property. It also calls for more follow-up when people file complaints.

The Impact Reduction Program, created in 2015, allows people to submit complaints about homeless campsites. The city then reviews those complaints, assesses the sites and potentially conducts clean-ups.

The program estimated it removed 2.6 million pounds of garbage in the 2017-18 fiscal year.

The clean-ups can be smaller scale, such as just removing garbage from the area, or more extensive. If they are extensive, the city removes personal property on the sites to thoroughly clean the area.

That property is taken to a storage facility if property owners aren't on-site at the time.

Although the city must legally hold that property for 30 days, many campers said it was challenging to get their stuff back, citing an unorganized storage procedure. Some homeless people said they were unable to leave their campsites to retrieve their property from the city for fear of items being stolen in their absence.

The audit suggests a property management system to solve the problem, as well as procedures to track inventory and property storage.

During the time of the audit, the city had two storage buildings with insufficient capacity for the property collected during cleanups. The city replaced those two buildings and now has a larger, more centrally located warehouse in Southeast Portland.

According to the audit, homeless advocates have criticized the clean-up program for "traumatizing the people in the camps."

Overall, the audit found the program improved conditions for people in or near the campsites.

The biggest thing campers asked for was more communication on when clean-ups would occur.

The audit states that the city posts notices around the camps about a week before a scheduled clean-up, but a lot of the time, those notices get torn down. It recommended more durable signage.

People who filed complaints about camps said they were disappointed in slow or lacking response from the city. About 37 percent of respondents said their complaint was not addressed. On the other end of that, about 80 percent of respondents said that status updates on clean-ups were important.

Without responses, people often submitted multiple complaints for the same sites.

In 2018, complaints ranged from 200 to 700 per week.

The audit assessed one week in particular, June 4-10, 2018. In that week, the program received 680 complaints.

Of those 680 complaints, the program sent assessment crews to visit the locations of 270.

It forwarded 167 complaints to other agencies, mostly the Oregon Department of Transportation for campsites on state land.

For the remaining 243 complaints, the audit found no assessment records or evidence of action.

During the following week, crews cleaned up 21 locations. An additional seven sites were listed in the clean-up log, but the audit found no photo documentation around those clean-ups.

Also, due to the program not monitoring timeliness, there was no way for the audit to decipher whether those 21 cleaned sites were directly related to the 680 complaints from the prior week.

The city auditor's office recommended seven suggestions for the city program, including giving people status updates on complaints.