February 6, 2020

Dear Mayor Wheeler and City Commissioners,

As the top state and federal law enforcement officers in Multnomah County, we join with a shared message to underscore the value of maintaining and fully supporting the Portland Police Bureau’s Gun Violence Reduction Team (GVRT).

The GVRT, a unit of PPB’s Tactical Operations Division, is part of a multi-agency, regional collaboration aimed at reducing gun violence throughout Multnomah County. They work collaboratively with both community and public safety partners to investigate instances of gun violence and to prevent future violence.

We are concerned that as part of the city’s annual budget process, you are considering reassigning GVRT personnel and funding to other police bureau units.

Recently, there has been an alarming increase in shootings in Portland. We share a profound concern for the safety of those who live in, work in, and visit our community. Reducing gun violence is a top priority for us. As career prosecutors who have worked hundreds of violent-crime cases, we have seen firsthand the devastating impact gun violence has on victims and the community. We have held the hands of grieving family members and watched indiscriminate gun violence take the lives of innocent bystanders.

Since 2017, the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the Multnomah County District Attorney’s Office have worked closely with the GVRT and other regional law enforcement partners to create and launch the Portland Area Crime Gun Initiative. Together, we have pooled our financial resources and personnel, aligned our policies with national best practices, acquired the latest forensic technology to support investigations, and redesigned how we collect data—all with the goal of rapidly responding to, reducing, and preventing future gun violence.

The GVRT is composed of officers and support staff who, together, have years of training and experience investigating gun crimes. They have a deep knowledge of our community and its history. While our combined gun crime prevention efforts are larger than any one partner, the GVRT’s unmatched collective knowledge and experience provides our community a steady foundation for achieving the region’s public safety goals.

The GVRT investigates all shootings in Portland with an extraordinary level of precision. Every piece of gunfire evidence and every gun recovered in the city is evaluated for connections to other crimes through the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN). Sometimes, these crimes have gone unsolved for decades. These investigations have linked shootings from Seattle to Eugene and, recently, helped lead to the filing of federal racketeering charges against one of Portland’s most notorious and violent gang members.

In 2019, more than 2,000 spent shell casings were collected by police officers across the metro region. Each trigger pull represents a life lost or altered or a near miss. The proper collection, handling, processing, and analysis of evidence from every shooting scene can help prevent the next shooting.
The impact of GVRT investigations on public safety cannot be overstated. Using objective ballistics technology and shared investigative resources, the GVRT and regional partners can now work exponentially faster and smarter to connect evidence and identify shooters, thereby increasing the likelihood of preventing the next tragedy. Furthermore, the GVRT’s investigative expertise and keen historical knowledge of our community positions them to identify other crimes from identity theft to human trafficking.

We know shootings beget shootings. Unfortunately, this explains why violent episodes are frequently clustered in time and location. While the number of shootings in Portland has increased dramatically, we believe the number of active shooters remains small. Until law enforcement can make arrests, these shooters remain on the street and continue to inflict violence and instill fear in our community. The GVRT’s rapid response interrupts and stops this cycle.

Preventing retaliatory shootings and assisting victims of gun violence is central to the GVRT mission. While patrol officers excel at community policing, GVRT officers and detectives bring unmatched investigative expertise and close ties to the community designed specifically to stop gun violence. The urgency and exacting approach GVRT brings to every shooting scene in Portland saves lives.

The GVRT is a mission-critical part of the Portland Area Crime Gun Initiative. They are the backbone of the ongoing regional gun violence reduction strategy and have been recognized nationally by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF).

A reduction in GVRT funding or a dismantling of the team altogether undercuts this regional effort and negatively impacts the local, state, and federal investments made to protect our community.

We stand in solidarity with our vibrant community. Enough is enough. The gun violence impacting our region must stop and the Portland Police Bureau’s Gun Violence Reduction Team remains at the center of that mission.

We urge you to continue fully supporting the GVRT.

Signed,

[Signature]

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Rod Underhill
District Attorney

Billy J. Williams
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