

<https://www.streetroots.org/news/2023/07/24/save-portland-street-response>

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Kaia Sand I Join the campaign to save Portland Street Response

Kaia Sand 24 Jul 2023

4–5 minutes

Opinion | Sign the Friends of Portland Street Response petition. Volunteer. Lend your logo to the effort.

“Not every crisis is a crime,” a Street Roots vendor jotted on a scrap of paper four years ago to hold up at a city council budget meeting.

Not every crisis is a fire. Not every crisis is a heart attack.

Sirens from police cars, fire trucks and ambulances roll through streets across the nation, and yet these responses don’t provide the right answers for many 911 calls. Locally, these calls are coded as a “welfare check” when someone looks to be in distress in a public place or they are alone in their apartment during extreme heat, as well as “unwanted person” calls because the caller wants a person to move.

First response systems have contorted to meet the changing needs — from police departments developing behavioral health units to fire departments developing into a largely medical system, recognizing that 19th-century conflagrations are no longer the driving need.

At worst, these first-responder adaptations have deadly impacts when a behavioral health crisis is met with a gun. They can also be exceedingly expensive, such as when ambulances and fire trucks meet a medical need that can be solved in the street with a medic. Often crises have both behavioral health and physical health components. A person in distress might have damaged feet, untreated wounds, an old burn that courses hot through the body.

This awareness that we need better options for first responders has created a state of unease among many people, including first responders.

Yet it is difficult to imagine something new.

Together we did just that in Portland. It was the collective outcry that our city needed better options that pushed the hand of Portland City Council in 2019. That was the year City Council began supporting the Portland Street Response pilot. During the hours of operation, those welfare checks and so-called unwanted person calls are now coded “PSR” by 911 call takers.

Now Portland Street Response is under attack. Immensely popular across Portland, it fails to have a champion in city hall. In the current form of government, individual commissioners hold too much sway over its future, and right now, that’s Commissioner Rene Gonzalez, who directs Portland Fire and Rescue, under which Portland Street Response runs. When the new form of government launches in 2024, bureaus will be run by a city manager, not an elected official.

Without a champion in city hall, it’s up to us to make our voices heard. At Street Roots, we describe Portland Street Response as

our “forever advocacy project,” aware that any program is under threat over time, especially when we are doing something so new.

Street Roots Advocacy is helping lead the Friends of Portland Street Response campaign alongside many others. Please join this effort to build power to make change. Portland Street Response is a people’s project. It’s a legacy all of us can grant to a better version of the city to come.

Sign the [petition](#).

[Volunteer](#).

Endorse by sending your logo to friendsofpsr@gmail.com

Street Roots is an award-winning weekly investigative publication covering economic, environmental and social inequity. The newspaper is sold in Portland, Oregon, by people experiencing homelessness and/or extreme poverty as means of earning an income with dignity. Street Roots newspaper operates independently of Street Roots advocacy and is a part of the Street Roots organization. [Learn more about Street Roots](#). Support your community newspaper by [making a one-time or recurring gift today](#).

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