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# Nearly 11,000 Oregonians Want City Leaders To Shore Up Portland Street Response

Courtney Vaughn Aug 3, 2023 at 3:26 pm

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Portland Street Response managers say a recent online petition garnering nearly 11,000 signatures is a resounding show of support, but internal memos indicate budget constraints and other directives still threaten the program’s livelihood.

On Wednesday, [Friends of Portland Street Response](#)—a group formed to organize public support for the city’s alternative, crisis response program—delivered paperwork to Portland City Hall showing more than 10,000 people signed an online petition to preserve funding and resources for Portland Street Response. The petition also urges city leaders to establish Portland Street Response (PSR) as its own independent branch of the city’s first responder network, and keep the program separate from enforcement of homeless camp sweeps, which PSR was recently asked to help with.

PSR has had a rocky year, marked by staffing losses, a hiring freeze, leadership changes, and directives from Portland City Commissioner Rene Gonzalez that soured many of the program’s

employees, and the public.

News of the program’s tumult catalyzed the public. Along with online petition signatures, Friends of Portland Street Response received endorsements from more than 40 regional elected officials and community leaders, including former Gov. Kate Brown and former Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury.

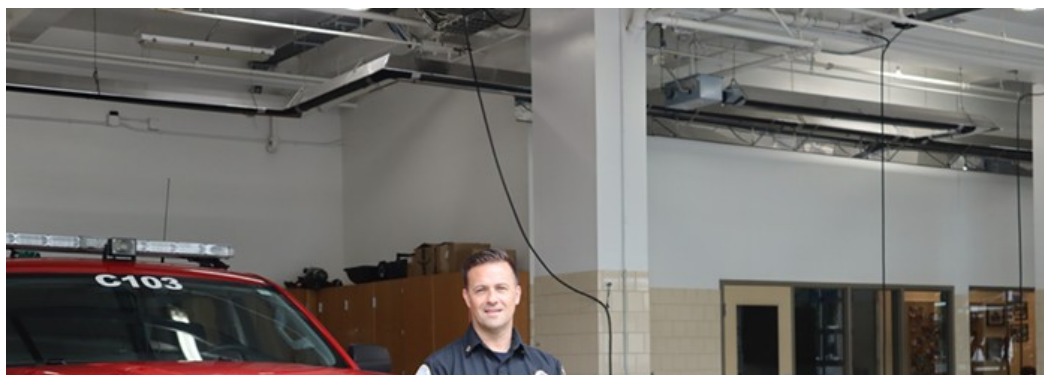
The outpouring of support was notable, but the program still shares funding and leadership with Portland Fire & Rescue (PF&R).

Memos sent to firefighters and PSR staff last week signal hope for rebuilding at PSR, but hiring and purchasing are still being heavily curtailed by the fire bureau.

In a July 26 memo to staff, incoming PSR Program Manager Lielah Leighton said she “proposed a plan to bring on additional staff” to help stabilize PSR operations and “resolve critical staffing needs – particularly on the weekends.”

“The stability of our ongoing funding depends on expanding our service hours to ensure continuous 24/7 operations,” Leighton said in her memo.

But the next day, PF&R Interim Chief Ryan Gillespie said despite the recent lifting of a hiring freeze at the fire bureau, no one is authorized to expand staff without explicit approval.





Ryan Gillespie, interim chief of Portland Fire & Rescue. courtney vaughn

Gillespie, who was tapped to manage PF&R on an interim basis after the retirement of former fire chief Sara Boone, said he supports PSR and intends to keep the program going, but noted “budgetary pressure” within the fire bureau’s budget that also impacts PSR.

“I am an advocate for Portland Street Response and the model of the program,” Gillespie told the *Mercury*.

But one of the first moves Gillespie made as chief was to freeze hiring and purchasing at PSR, further fueling speculation of efforts to sabotage the program. Gillespie said there were compliance issues with the spending and purchasing protocols at PSR that didn’t follow city guidelines.

“What I’ve observed the last few months...is that the mission for PSR isn’t entirely clear internally and externally,” Gillespie said.

“The reason the purchasing was put on hold, is it was happening outside of established legal city procurement guidelines. That structure of how we purchase things, the policies—none of that was put in place.”

Gillespie promised fiscal stewardship and said the austerity measures are an effort to “avoid overspending the bureau’s budget

allocation.” He said any new hiring or recruitment needs to be run up the chain of command, and any expenditure over \$5,000 needs prior approval.

This week, a fire bureau spokesperson told the *Mercury* it’s “very likely PSR will be hiring additional staff,” but formal decisions are still at least a week out.

## **Staffing losses, shifting directives**

When it was announced in February that PSR workers would no longer be able to distribute tarps or tents to people living on the streets, Catie Elzie saw the writing on the wall.

Elzie, a licensed clinical social worker, joined PSR last August, four months before Gonzalez took office and started overseeing the fire bureau, which houses the program. At the time, PSR was expanding its reach, having just been launched city-wide last spring.

By late March, Elzie resigned. She was one of nine employees to either get fired or resign from the program from February to May this year, city records show.

She cited Gonzalez’s directives—namely, the tent and tarp ban—as the primary catalyst for her departure.

“Before that, we were giving him the benefit of the doubt,” Elzie told the *Mercury*. “As soon as he banned tents, I was like, ‘Oh, this is political theater.’”

PSR’s tent and tarp ban was announced shortly after one of Portland’s worst snowstorms in 80 years. In response, [a majority of PSR employees conveyed disapproval](#).

Two months later, Commissioner Gonzalez had a new directive for PSR workers: they would soon be asked to start accompanying other city staff during homeless campsite removals, or “sweeps.” The intent was for PSR to connect unhoused people with shelter or other services. To Elzie, it was a moral quandary.



Catie Elzie, a former Portland Street Response employee, said she left the program

largely because of directives from City Commissioner Rene Gonzalez that clashed with her ethics as a mental health professional. courtney vaughn

“It’s basically trying to turn PSR into enforcement, rather than health care, which is the opposite of what we should be doing,” Elzie said. She said if the public starts to see PSR as another arm of police, it will erode trust among the vulnerable communities PSR serves, and defeat the mission.

Elzie said homeless services was never the mission of the



program, but the majority of calls involve unhoused people. Often, giving them tools to survive on the streets is essential to meet their basic needs and address larger mental health issues.

Still, PSR's distribution of tents, food, and clothing has been a bone of contention between mental health workers at PSR and Gonzalez's staff.

Gonzalez's staff declined repeated requests for an interview, and did not respond to questions, instead deferring to the fire bureau, but staff from other city departments who spoke to the *Mercury* on background say Gonzalez's policy advisors view PSR's aid to the city's homeless as part of the problem, not the solution.

What's more, Gonzalez's distaste for certain aid programs has spilled over into PSR.

In her memo to PSR staff last week, Leighton, the new program manager, reiterated that tents, tarps, and harm reduction (i.e. safe use kits for drugs) are not approved for distribution.

Gonzalez has been outspoken about his disapproval of harm reduction programs—namely, recent plans by Multnomah County to distribute smoking kits to opioid addicts to prevent users from injecting with unclean needles.

Previously, PSR distributed safe use kits when necessary, which included Narcan to prevent opioid overdoses.

“I want to acknowledge that many of you have expressed frustration and a sense of loss adjusting to these changes in our supply stock and distribution practices,” Leighton wrote in a memo to staff. “I also want to acknowledge that being clear about the very real limits of our response model creates the opportunity to build

the best possible version of Portland Street Response – a program with a specific mission and scope that works synergistically along a broader continuum of care in our community.”

PSR did not respond to the *Mercury's* request for an interview with Leighton.

Elzie, who previously trained with Leighton prior to leaving PSR, said she's confident Leighton will advocate for PSR's success, but Elzie points to a disconnect between leadership at City Hall and the work of PSR, noting a fundamental misunderstanding of the program's mission and scope.

“It's actually a mobile mental crisis team, not a homeless services team,” Elzie said, though PSR employees have disavowed recent City Council policies around homelessness, including to Gonzalez's direct staff.

Soon after Gonzalez took office, he sent two of his staff to meet with PSR employees. That was the first inkling of the rift that would soon surface.

“He sent his former campaign manager and a communications guy, not a policy advisor,” Elzie noted. She remembers Shah Smith, Gonzalez's former campaign manager and current chief of staff, showed up in a Little Lebowski urban achievers t-shirt, a nod to a scene in the cult classic film, *The Big Lebowski*.

Elzie suggests the commissioner's staff either didn't take PSR seriously, or wanted to sway them with common cultural ground. During the meeting, Elzie said PSR employees vocalized disapproval of the city's intent to criminalize homelessness and force people into sanctioned camps through new City Council initiatives.

“We were talking about the sanctioned campsites and why we don’t support it and why it’s a bad idea,” Elzie recalled. “We told them there’s not enough shelter capacity for you to start doing these sweeps...Gonzalez’s team was looking at us, like ‘Ohhh.’”

Soon after that initial meeting, Gonzalez started calling for PSR to cut off supply distribution.

PSR’s program leader, Robyn (Burek) White also found the relationship with Gonzalez’s staff and fire bureau leadership untenable. White left the program in July. In [an exit interview](#), she suggested a lack of transparency and support from Gonzalez’s staff and fire bureau leadership made it difficult for her to grow the program and made her feel “set up to fail.”

Gillespie paints a different picture, saying PSR simply grew too fast, with too little oversight or structure. Evaluators at Portland State University drew the same conclusions, but noted employees’ concerns about staff turnover and new directives.

“[Employees] noted wanting more structure and support in their jobs, and the need for additional role clarification, training opportunities, and supervision,” [a report released in June](#) notes.

“They also discussed challenges related to staffing shortages during the program’s expansion, cultural differences between PSR and PF&R, service and resource gaps that make it difficult to connect clients to services and resources, and concerns about PSR’s changing mission.”

## **Portlanders urge city leaders to right the ship**

It’s unclear what direct impact, if any, the Save Portland Street Response petition will have on the program’s future.



Friends of Portland Street Response organizers said they wanted to send a clear message to City Hall.

“I see it as the public’s responsibility to make clear what it is we’re demanding, and the council’s responsibility to see it through,” Kaia Sand, executive director of Street Roots and one of the petitioners, told the *Mercury*. “It’s grafted on to fire right now, but eventually it should be its own standalone bureau.”

Sand said PSR is a successful model amid a first responder system that “is not contemporary and is not built for all the crises we see today.”

“Portland Street Response was the first one (to respond to) the 21st century needs, but it’s fledgling,” Sand said. “It was meeting its benchmarks until the hiring freeze in February.”

Hope Beraka is a Realtor who also sits on the board for Business For a Better Portland and helped gather online signatures. Beraka said “shifting behaviors out of City Council” regarding PSR gave her pause.

“All of a sudden it felt like, oh my gosh, we’re going in the wrong direction, we’re backsliding,” Beraka said. “Council, like many of us in life, needs some feedback and accountability. I think that’s what this petition does.”

The developments have spurred hope among those who initiated the petition, but others are cautiously optimistic.

To effect real change, Elzie says PSR will need to fix the culture war brewing among PSR, PF&R, and the program’s leadership at City Hall.

If PSR workers are continually pushed into the realm of discomfort,

staffing rifts might continue.

“When you push people into a corner and make them compromise their values, it’s not good,” Elzie said. “We have to be able to live our ethics.”