

To: Commissioner Rene Gonzalez
rene.gonzalez@portlandoregon.gov

cc: Mayor Ted Wheeler, Commissioners Carmen Rubio,
Mingus Mapps, Dan Ryan

November 29, 2023



Dear Commissioner Gonzalez,

Three months ago, a group of volunteers with Friends of Portland Street Response (PSR) [delivered a petition](#) to City Hall in support of expanding and supporting PSR that had amassed over [10,000 signatures in less than 10 days](#). That petition currently has the additional support of over 20 elected leaders, 10 candidates for Portland City Council, and 100+ local businesses, faith institutions, non-profits, and community leaders.

When our volunteers delivered the petition 3 months ago, they were met by your Chief of Staff. He told us that Commissioner Gonzalez would meet with us, and also encouraged us to set up a meeting with Portland Fire & Rescue leadership. He also shared your commitment to Portland Street Response.

Today Friends of PSR is writing to express disappointment that after having scheduled 3 meetings over the last few months, each meeting was subsequently canceled by your office. Additionally, after exchanging a few emails with different staff at Portland Fire & Rescue, we were never offered a meeting with leadership. The group of volunteers you canceled with 3 consecutive times included prominent business leaders, faith leaders, service providers, and people instrumental in the creation of PSR. To date, the only City Commissioner who has met with Friends of PSR volunteers has been Commissioner Carmen Rubio.

After three consecutive cancellations and your office being unwilling to hold potential dates for a 4th attempt at meeting with our volunteers, we decided we are no longer interested in being strung along. The almost 12,000 Portlanders who have signed the petition do not deserve to be treated with such seeming disregard and disrespect.

Instead, we are sending this letter with questions related to 5 specific concerns that have yet to be sufficiently answered since PSR's promised 24/7 expansion was put on indefinite hiatus. This occurred as a result of policy choices you made regarding this successful 911 first response option that has such strong community support.

Over the course of the past year, you have provided a variety of statements regarding Portland Street Response - some of which contradict each other. On behalf of the almost 12,000 Portlanders who have signed the petition to Save PSR, we respectfully ask for a written answer to each question in

detail no later than 2 weeks from today. Portlanders deserve honesty and transparency from our elected leaders.

1) Do you support expanding Portland Street Response 24/7, as was unanimously funded last year by the Portland City Council? If yes, can you provide a specific plan and timeline?

- On July 19, [KOIN](#) asked you to react to the Friends of PSR petition and reported that you are “100% committed to expanding the program to 24/7 as soon as possible, but would not say when that would happen.” On July 25th, you [tweeted](#) in reference to PSR that “24/7/365 has always had my support.”
- A few weeks later when [Axios Portland](#) asked you about the requirement that PSR must operate 24/7 to receive federal funds, they reported you contradicting your “100%” commitment to expanding PSR 24/7: “Medicaid could come with complicated billing and strings attached. While it might require PSR to expand to 24/7 service, which Gonzalez would back if required, he says that expansion doesn't look necessary based on when calls come in.” PSR currently operates from 8am to 10pm.

2) What is the status of PSR's staffing and budget - specifically:

- **What is PSR's current budget allocation and how many FTE does PSR currently have? Where did PSR's budget devoted to hiring more staff go when you ordered a hiring freeze earlier this year? Is it still on the table, as Portland Fire Chief Gillepsie said to the [Oregonian](#) on June 23rd, to “rob Peter to pay Paul” in order to use money previously allocated to PSR to fund different Portland Fire & Rescue programs?**
 - This concern is heightened by our understanding that the Community Health Access and Treat (CHAT) program in Portland Fire & Rescue received less CareOregon funding City than leaders requested.
 - It is also our understanding that earlier this month, there was a Saturday evening where no PSR responders were available due to short staffing. The amount of [calls PSR has responded to](#) in recent months is on the decline.
- **What is the current status of the pursuit to receive Medicaid reimbursement through federal legislation authored by Senator Ron Wyden?**
 - At the end of last year, [Medicaid reimbursement](#) was expected soon, but [an unsupportive working environment](#) led to the resignation of PSR's former Program Manager who was leading that process. On July 25, you [tweeted](#) that Medicaid reimbursement “*is absolutely worth pursuing.*” However, we understand that the City has not yet submitted a formal application for Medicaid reimbursement and little effort has been made towards this stated goal.

- 3) Do you support expanding the call types PSR can respond to, including certain calls inside private residences or involving a potential suicide attempt, as recommended by the DOJ? What is the status of expanding the 911 call types PSR can respond to?**
- Additionally, it's our understanding that there have been restrictions placed on PSR's ability to respond inside public buildings, which they were previously allowed to do.
- 4) What supplies are PSR responders currently allowed to use to de-escalate 911 calls and build trust with the clients they serve, after almost all previously utilized supplies were suddenly restricted earlier this year?**
- We have learned that the supply closet for PSR is now locked and that Portland Fire & Rescue leadership has told PSR employees that distributing life saving supplies previously utilized by PSR is "enabling." If you believe this to be the case, what alternatives do you propose for PSR interacting with people in crisis who need life-saving supplies such as warm clothing and food? What alternative do you support that would enable PSR to de-escalate people in crisis and build trust?
- 5) What is the status of determining the best way to establish PSR as a co-equal branch of our first responder system in a supportive environment? Will you commit to a public process before any decisions are made to potentially move PSR out of Portland Fire & Rescue or the City of Portland?**
- PSR's top established goal is to offer an unarmed, effective response to non-violent 911 calls involving people in crisis instead of a police response - thereby freeing police up to respond to higher level emergencies. The City of Portland is primarily responsible for public safety and 911 response, and it is imperative that PSR remains as first responders to stay true to the [national model's](#) goal.
 - You have publicly floated the idea of [moving PSR to Multnomah County](#). Moving PSR to Multnomah County brings a number of questions and concerns, including that PSR is distinct from Multnomah County's Project Respond, a privately-contracted program that is not primarily dispatched through 911, and is not a police alternative but instead [usually a co-responder with police](#).

On behalf of Portlanders who deserve honesty and transparency and who support PSR, we look forward to your answers within two weeks.

Sincerely,
Friends of PSR