

Portland police say there has been an ongoing slide in reported bias crimes based on sexual orientation during the past several months, and they're not sure what's behind that drop.

"Are the crimes not occurring or do we no longer have the trust of the community?" pondered Mark Paresi, an assistant chief with the Portland Police Bureau, during a Feb. 9 meeting of the Sexual Minorities Roundtable.

The roundtable, which was established in the early 1990s as a monthly gathering of sexual minorities and bureau personnel, is designed to give participants the chance to exchange information and share concerns about law enforcement interaction with sexual minorities. Bureau roundtables also exist for other constituencies, such as Asians and Hispanics.

In 1994, the Sexual Minorities Roundtable crafted a partnership agreement, signed on Oct. 11, National Coming Out Day, which urged the members of the bureau and community to continue meeting on a regular basis, and asked them to "work to increase personal safety." The agreement also included a commitment by police to recruit and retain sexual minorities.

Often times, the queer roundtable has served as a debriefing site, a place where police representatives would give community members updates on hate crimes or a particular bias case.

As with reported bias incidents, roundtable attendance has plummeted over time, prompting some to question whether the entity should disband.

Others, however, disagree, arguing it is an important communication channel to law enforcement. With anti-gay ballot initiative campaigns always a distinct possibility in Oregon, they say that such a networking device is vital to the community's well-being.

Participation in the Crisis Response Team for sexual minorities is also sputtering.

The bureau has four teams covering the North/Northeast, Asian, Hispanic and sexual minorities communities. The former, established in 1994, was so successful it led to the creation of the others teams. The sexual minorities Crisis Response Team was founded in 1996.

The team is comprised of screened and trained volunteers who provide support to vic-

## CRITICAL NEED

**Sexual minority participation in community policing programs is in a slump** by Inga Sorensen

tims of traumatic events, their families and loved ones following a crisis.

Team members may be called by police or medical personnel to assist with serious assaults, homicides, accidental deaths, and hate- or bias-motivated crimes, among other situations.

According to police, in many situations the first responders to an emergency don't have the resources to provide the services needed by the victims. As a result, the victims or survivors may feel confused or isolated, which can increase their trauma during an already stressful period.

The team may help minimize the effects of the trauma by providing services frequently not available through other means. It also may be more comfortable, for example, for a victim of a gay bashing to receive support from another gay person.

If necessary, team members provide immediate on-site support to those affected by the incident; accompany an injured person to the hospital; assist with follow-up referrals to appropriate agencies, including victim assistance programs; help with funeral arrangements; and follow up with the victim or family for at least two weeks.

In addition, the team can be utilized as a preventive measure during protests, social events

or holidays, and to dispel rumors and tension surrounding a particular incident.

William Warren, an architect of the partnership agreement and originator of the sexual minorities Crisis Response Team, has also served as a team member.

"Sometimes a victim or the victim's partner may just want to sit quietly with you," he explains. "Other times they may ask a lot of questions, like 'Was it a hate crime? What do we do next? Will our names be in the paper?' If the victim wants to press charges, you can assist with that process.... It varies from situation to situation."

Whatever the circumstance, Warren says, it feels good to know the support you provide may make a trying time a bit easier for someone.

"Your team is the only one losing members," Paresi told the Sexual Minorities Roundtable. "We need your participation for this to work...the officers rely upon you."

As of Jan. 31, the North/Northeast team had 27 members, followed by the Asian team with 13 participants, Hispanic team with 11, and sexual minorities with 3 members.

Officer Victoria Wade, program coordinator for all the teams, says

the sexual minorities group is "hurting" for volunteers.

She says a training is planned for the near future "probably just for the sexual minorities team because the numbers are so low."

As for the decline in reported bias crimes, Paresi asked roundtable attendees to informally survey the community to try and get a sense of what's happening.

Bias crimes are criminal acts against people and property who are targeted because of, among other categories, sexual orientation. In 1996, 42 sexual orientation-related bias crimes were reported. That number dropped to 31 in 1997, and declined to 20 last year.

Allanya Guenther, executive director of Phoenix Rising Foundation, an agency providing mental health services to sexual minorities, attended the Feb. 9 roundtable meeting.

She suggested "more violence is occurring than you're seeing," and she cited instances of domestic violence between same-sex couples.

"A gay man involved in a domestic assault may feel he won't be taken seriously by police," she told Paresi. "We don't address domestic violence in this community."

She also said queer youth, who may not want—or know how to—turn to police are often the targets of harassment and violence.

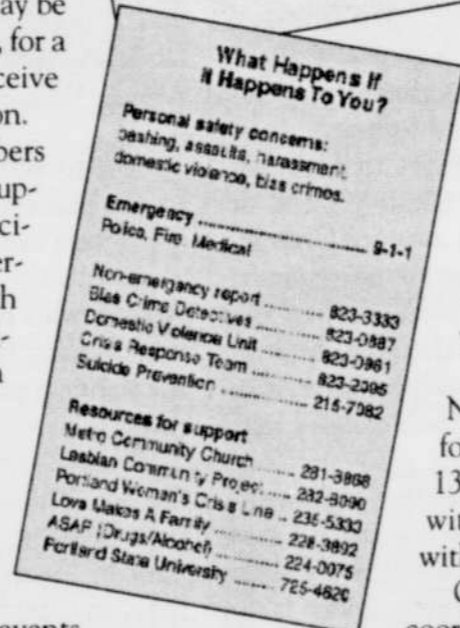
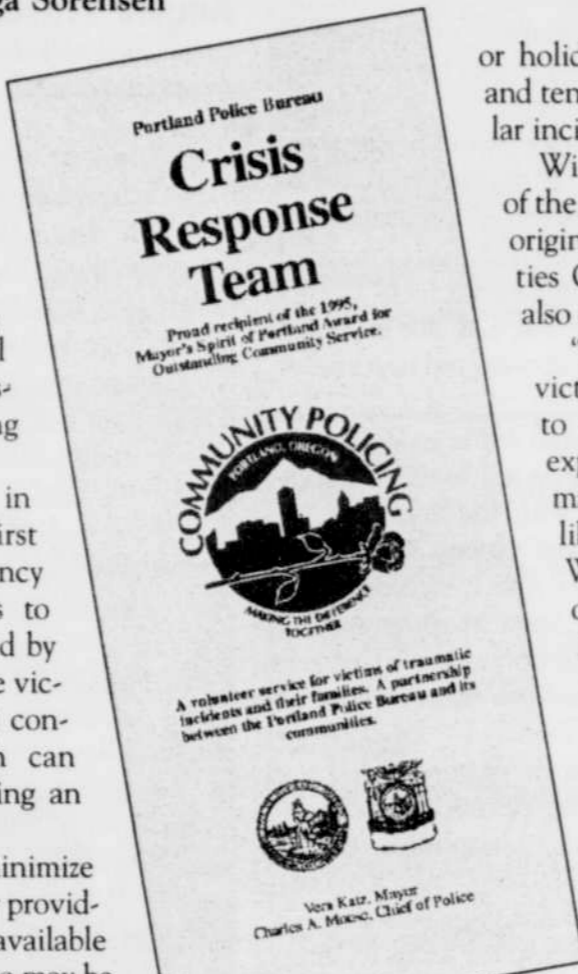
Transsexual activist Lori Buckwalter added many transsexual and transgendered people may "feel reluctant to partake" in a system they simply don't trust.

Meanwhile, Norm Costa, vice chair of Pride Northwest Inc., which orchestrates Portland's annual pride parade, said he expects reports will jump "if we have another mean-spirited campaign."

Warren later told *Just Out*: "I'm befuddled as to what is happening. Maybe it's the calm before the storm, or maybe we're in a better place."

■ The SEXUAL MINORITIES ROUNDTABLE meets on the second Tuesday of each month from noon to 1 p.m. in the chief's office at the Portland Police Bureau, 1111 S.W. Second Ave. in Portland. The meetings are open to the entire community.

To learn more about becoming a CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM volunteer, call Victoria Wade at 823-2095.



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