

# Bureau continues making changes that positively impact community

BY MICHAEL REESE  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



Michael Reese is the Chief of Police for the Portland Police Bureau.

Recently, Portland police officers responded to a call regarding a distraught man who told onlookers near the RiverPlace Marina he was going to commit suicide. He took some pills and jumped into the Willamette River from the dock. The man then swam away from a Good Samaritan and began to drown. He was eventually pulled from the water semi-conscious by a sheriff's office boat and transported to a local hospital. Sadly, this same man was previously assisted by Portland police officers not even a month ago, when he overdosed on pills and was threatening suicide by jumping off of a downtown parking structure. This is just one example of people in mental health crisis who officers come in contact with not just once, but multiple times. In fact, we estimate that out of the 400,000 contacts, 20 to 25 percent involve people in some form of mental health crisis.

As a law enforcement agency, over the last decade, police have had a dynamic shift from responding to criminal issues to responding to people affected by homelessness, addiction and mental health issues. Unfortunately, due to starved budgets across the state, our system has given officers less options to help these vulnerable people, especially if they are experiencing a mental health crisis. These situations are complex, unfold quickly and have no guaranteed outcomes. Often, arriving officers have no idea whether the person is suffering from a medical problem, mental health problem and/or concurrent drug and alcohol issues — all of which require different approaches.

Two weeks ago the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division presented their legal conclusions regarding the Portland Police Bureau's use of force in regard to individuals in mental health crisis. Without excuses or finger pointing, we collectively acknowledge that we find ourselves in a

difficult situation that we are going to work to change. We are now moving forward on a collaborative and definitive agreement between the DOJ and the city of Portland on how to make changes that fit our city in regard to mental health, use of force and community outreach.

The good news is we already began making changes that are having positive impacts. Last year, the police bureau did not use force 99.71 percent of the time of the 400,000 contacts a year. In fact, over the last four years, force is down 35 percent. This is a result of some significant changes involving policy and training. In addition, we created an inspector position responsible for reviewing all force incidents looking for trends or patterns that may be problematic. We also began requiring supervisors to go to every scene in which force is used, interview witnesses and conduct an investigation right on the spot.

In the coming weeks the community will see more changes that I am pleased about. We are changing the Taser policy to be in line with what we've been training officers to do. These changes are based on recent court rulings and changes to national police standards.

We are also making changes in the area of crisis intervention, and we have work to do in regard to community outreach. We have improved our hiring efforts to better reflect the community we serve. Since January 2011, 40 percent of new police officers hired by the Portland Police Bureau are women and ethnic minorities. Our Personnel Division has done an outstanding job of recruiting and hiring these highly qualified and sought-after applicants to the police bureau.

Meanwhile, Mayor Sam Adams is working with other community leaders, including Commissioner Amanda Fritz and Multnomah County Chairman Jeff Cogen, to ensure that our community and crisis mental health system is bolstered to provide the right resources at the right time to

people who need them. He is working to establish a crisis triage center where police officers can take individuals in crisis as an alternative option to an emergency room or jail so that they can be evaluated, treated and connected to case workers and longer term treatment. Mayor Adams recognizes the fact that Portland police play a significant role in the provision of mental health services in this community and is working to position our officers with options to help Portlanders in crisis with access to adequate treatment.

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Finally, we will be doing a lot of listening in regard to how we can build the relationships that are so very important. I hope to meet with community members, agency partners, mental health advocates, and others in the coming days and weeks to capture the collective community insight that Portlanders can provide.

These are just a few of the changes we are making as we dive into this process. Additional ideas, such as the expansion of the Division Street Walk-In clinic operated by Cascadia or enhanced intensive case management teams, are broader concepts that require community stakeholders beyond the police bureau.

I believe Portland police officers go out every day and do an incredible job in complex and difficult circumstances. Now is the time to seize these opportunities and provide officers with additional resources so they can assist more people. I look forward to making these changes to better meet the community's expectations.



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