

Our newest, not-so-new police directive: Just walk away

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The Portland Police Bureau recently made a stunning and unprecedented discovery — but, sadly, no one noticed. Probably because most of us knew it all along.

Their non-breakthrough was this: Sometimes, the right police action is no action at all.

After a disastrous decade of using excessive force against persons with mental illness, the bureau this week issued a directive informing officers of actions to take in a variety of gray areas.

The way the police ought to help someone in a mental health crisis is as follows:

1. Check in with the person.
2. If they're OK, walk away.
3. If they're not, provide help.

The directive underscores the option for officers to just walk away. Assessing risk and choosing to engage — or to not engage — has always been police practice, but now it is a policy.

The new directive strives to meet a community concern and interest — that police recognize the sick and disabled require consideration, compassion and alternatives to jail.

Compassion is always revolutionary, but since Mayor Charlie Hales refused to develop alternatives to jail (as required by the settlement of U.S. v. City of Portland), police have the same two options they

always did — make an arrest, or just walk away.

Here's an essential truth about mental illness: People like us go into crisis all the time. It's in our nature. Others without mental illness, most of the time, don't. It's not in your nature.

Most crises do not require police intervention. Most need no medical attention, no counseling, no medication, no confinement. Let's not be dramatic; crisis is routine. If anything, most crises require a smile, a cup of hot chocolate. Crisis requires compassion.

When an officer's assessment shows there is not enough criminal risk for an arrest, and not enough civil risk for a hold, they should do nothing. The law requires it. The officer has no cause to act; Police are not the solution. They must, by law, walk away.

And for the most part, they do — in Portland and everywhere else. They routinely use discernment. They just walk away.

So what's the problem?

The problem the directive describes is not the excessive force used by police. The directive identifies the problem as the people in crisis and their illnesses.

A more satisfying "Mental Health Crisis Response" directive would include an acknowledgment of the wrongness of using excessive force against people with mental illness, and a well-defined path to removing officers from service who harm people with mental illness.

But nowhere in the directive — or any

document by the Portland Police Bureau — does the bureau accept and acknowledge fault or begin to hold officers accountable for avoidable harm they cause to sick people.

To this day, instead of acceptance, acknowledgement and accountability, the City attorney — with the endorsement of City Council, and in lockstep with the police

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union — continues to deny fault and has even started a legal battle to try to get part of the court's order reversed.

The police and their defenders consider this misdirection progress. They'd like us to think their episode of violence is over, their crisis of honesty has passed.

It's tempting. We'd like it to be over too.

But it's that very recalcitrance on the part of the city and the directive's authors — which we believe is both systemic and pathological — that reminds us to turn back and get into the mess yet again. Because civilian oversight of police — and city hall — is a constant responsibility, not an intermittent one.

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