

Infighting & exodus

Why are so many members of a Portland Police Bureau oversight board calling it quits?

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Nine months into its existence, the community board put in place by the U.S. Department of Justice to make recommendations to the Portland Police Bureau regarding its use of excessive force has lost one-third of its voting members and one alternate.

Each board member signed up for what was supposed to be a two-year commitment.

These departures – including that of its chair, former Oregon Chief Justice Paul DeMuniz, in April – have complicated what's already proved to be a daunting and overwhelming task for some members.

In the wake of DeMuniz's resignation, a pattern of infighting, mistrust and general frustration with a lack of process emerged.

This group of volunteers, known as the Community Oversight and Advisory Board, or COAB, has an important job to do – and it's at the center of rebuilding the community's trust with the Portland Police Bureau.

In 2012, a federal investigation found Portland police used excessive force with people who were or appeared to be mentally ill. As a result, in 2014, a settlement agreement was approved, and the bureau was given five years to come into compliance with a long list of Department of Justice requirements that included changes to policy, training and oversight.

The settlement was unique in that it created a board made up of unpaid volunteers selected for the task of making recommendations to the Police Bureau and assisting with oversight of the bureau's compliance with the settlement agreement.

The COAB includes 15 voting members representing various factions of the community, five Portland Police Bureau representatives and several non-voting alternates.

"Since we're focused on the mental health community," COAB member Bud Feuleless said, "we selected members who currently struggle with or who have struggled with mental health, and so that's unique; it's special. But it also gives us some very unique and special challenges."

Of the six members who've left the COAB, two were self-identified as having mental illness, however many board members who've experienced mental illness did not identify themselves as such during the application process, said Feuleless – herself included.

Reasons members gave for leaving the COAB vary. Some cited personal reasons; two resigned from other boards, negating their membership; and others left because

the time commitment

was misrepresented to them during the application process.

The application said participation would take 10 hours per month, but several past and present members of the COAB told Street Roots they spent upward of 40 hours per month on COAB-related work. Some said they spent 20 or 30 hours per week on the COAB, from research and homework to subcommittee meetings and community engagement.

Sharon Maxwell became the most recent voting member to leave the COAB, and she called for two audits on her way out the door.

Her resignation letter, dated Oct. 7, was sent to the city auditor, committee members, city council members and the federal judge who issued the settlement, among others.

Maxwell served on numerous boards and civic committees, including Groundwork Portland and the city's Minority Evaluator Program.

Her letter contains a numbered list of 11 reasons for resigning, culminating in what she called a "betrayal to every Portland resident in this city."

In an interview with Street Roots, Maxwell, a Portland native, said that to heal the broken trust between Portlanders and their police, the settlement process must have meaningful community engagement, but some members think their voices are

being hushed and that the COAB was set up to fail.

Maxwell's resignation letter requested audits of the hiring process for the Compliance Officer-Community Liaison team and its budget.

The Compliance Officer-Community Liaison, also established under the Department of Justice settlement, is an independent agency hired to act as liaison among the COAB, the city, the Department of Justice and the Police Bureau and to conduct oversight of the settlement's implementation.

The Compliance Officer-Community Liaison is made up of a Chicago-based team, Dennis Rosenbaum and Amy Watson. Locally, the team hired longtime community activist Kathleen Saadat to facilitate the COAB meetings after DeMuniz resigned for personal reasons. Amy Ruiz, former chief of staff to Mayor Sam Adams, was hired to assist Saadat.

Concerns Maxwell laid out in her resignation letter and accompanying email, such as what she said was the Compliance Officer-Community Liaison's failure to support COAB members, were echoed by former COAB member Kristi Jamison and current member Myrlaviani Rivier during interviews with Street Roots. All three expressed frustration over the lack of process and confusion surrounding the COAB's role in the settlement and worried the group was ineffective.

Saadat said her greatest frustration has been "the lack of sound foundation being laid for this board" and noted the training and orientation for board members at the outset were not sufficient. But, she said, "it's getting better. It's more functional than

it was a few months ago."

In regard to the time commitment required of board members, she said, "some are spending a lot of time, some are spending a little, depending on interest or job status."

Tasked with serving as mental health support to the COAB is Brad Taylor. He's a city employee with 15 years experience in the social-service arena, and he expressed major concerns about the COAB's functionality.

(Taylor is also sits on Street Roots' Board of Directors.)

Among COAB members, rumors circulated that Taylor was sending secret reports to the city about their behavior during meetings. On Tuesday, Taylor's supervisor, Stephanie Reynolds, program manager at the Office of Neighborhood Involvement, issued a statement to COAB members, stating that these rumors were false.

What Taylor was actually reporting were his concerns about the group environment and recommendations he believed would address issues of mistrust and dysfunction.

In April, Taylor sent an email to the Compliance Officer-Community Liaison stating, "It seems that the COAB was put to work, starting from an already behind position," and noting it was handed a full agenda before fully understanding what its role was under the settlement agreement, and before its members were able to get an understanding of each other's backgrounds and priorities.

He said he was also concerned that much of the communication between COAB members was taking place in private emails.

"If a member of the public were to ask to see what the COAB has been considering, I would need to print hundreds of pages of emails, and the format would be almost impossible to follow."

Watson said COAB members should be using its website forums to communicate, but use has been sporadic.

