



PHOTO BY CELESTE NOCHE

Portland Police Chief Danielle Outlaw visited the Street Roots office for an interview with vendors and staff about police relations with the city's homeless residents.

# THE STREET BEAT

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Danielle Outlaw has been thrust into the spotlight. The first African-American woman to serve as chief of the Portland Police Bureau, she's been faced with multiple high-profile challenges since taking over in 2017.

Her bureau's handling of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement office's occupation, clashes between Patriot Prayer and Antifa and officer-involved shootings have grabbed headlines while Outlaw's public statements and her representation in the press have become news items of their own. It's been quite a quagmire the 42-year-old former Oakland, Calif., deputy police chief has contended with during her first 14 months on the job.

Beneath the surface, however, Portland police are drowning in endless calls for service involving the city's homeless population as the Police Bureau continues to grapple with the longer-term issue of how to respond to those incidents.

While the bureau faced widespread criticism following The Oregonian's report that the majority of arrests in 2017 were of people experiencing homelessness, police union President Daryl Turner argued police had become a scapegoat for what are really

## Portland Police Chief Danielle Outlaw tells Street Roots staff and vendors that police are chasing the radio while getting blamed for problems they cannot solve

the city's failed policies.

At last count, there were 4,177 people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County, up 10 percent from 2015. About 60 percent of those counted self-identified as having a disability, including mental health and substance abuse disorders, further complicating the bureau's role as the city's main point of contact with its houseless residents.

The bureau is still working to fulfill a settlement it reached with the U.S. Department of Justice over how the police treat people with mental illness. The Justice Department in 2012 found the bureau "engages in a pattern or practice of unnecessary or unreasonable force during interactions with people who have or are perceived to have mental illness."

At Street Roots, police interactions are a regular topic of conversation in the vendor office, so we sat down with seven Street Roots vendors who have had recent

interactions with Portland police while they were experiencing homelessness.

While the nature of their interactions and opinions of the bureau ran the gamut, several patterns emerged. Most sitting at our roundtable said they did not feel as though the bureau was there to serve them and that they did not feel comfortable calling the police for help. They also said they felt the bureau over-responds to incidents involving homeless folks, sending more officers to the scene than are needed, often overwhelming the person they're contacting, who in some cases appears to be in a mental-health crisis.

We questioned Outlaw about these concerns during a recent interview at our office in Old Town. Our editorial staff was joined by Street Roots vendor Sean Sheffield for a wide-ranging interview about her first year on the job and her plans moving forward, particularly regarding how the Police Bureau deals with individuals experiencing homelessness and mental-

health issues.

**Street Roots reporter Emily Green:** Reporters at *The Oregonian* found 52 percent of arrests in 2017 were of people experiencing homelessness. Many of the arrests were for nonviolent, livability-type crimes. While we understand the bureau may dispute that percentage, it's harder to dispute that these findings do show that there is a significant amount of police resources going to the policing of people experiencing homelessness. When you read that article, what went through your mind?

**Portland Police Chief Danielle Outlaw:** The biggest takeaway for me is that we have to find a way to address the root cause of the issue. Because the calls for service aren't going to stop on our end. We don't have the luxury, when someone calls the police for service, to say, "We're not coming." And a lot of times, we don't know what we're responding to.

I've heard a lot of criticism, and constructive feedback also, when the article came out, saying, "Look, we understand that people call the police, you have to show up, and there might be crimes evident there, but it's the low-hanging fruit, and does that create a disproportionality with how you police and provide service to the

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