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OPINION

Another New Year and a Chance to Get it Right

10 steps to address gun violence

Like the year before, 2022 will be remembered for the greatest number of gun-related deaths in Portland ever. This fact is despite historic actions taken by the City, community leaders, and local stakeholder groups throughout the year. This extraordinary response was called for one year ago when community leaders and stakeholder groups insisted on greater City-led efforts combined with the deployment of community-led, local, grassroots efforts which could employ innovative approaches to solve unique aspects of the cycle of gun violence in Portland.

Here's the list of steps identified one year ago, and how we did:

1) Have the City Council declare that intervening to stop the violence is their number one priority and that they will set aside their differences until the crisis of gun violence has been addressed with active measures.

How we did: 'A' On July 21st Mayor Ted Wheeler issued a state of emergency declaration along with plans to implement it in an agile, accountable, coordinated and fair manner with the goal of reducing Portland's gun violence by at least 10% over the next two years. As part of that plan, Wheeler also announced Safer Summer PDX, a community intervention approach addressing preventing gun violence. The program utilized the Portland Peace Initiative to work with small grassroots organization to help get unhoused or at-risk youth involved in positive activities rather than join a gang, commit or become a victim of gun violence.

2) Convene a City Council working session to hear from California Partnership for Safe Communities and/or similar experts on reducing gun violence to brief the Council on what strategies they recommend to intervene to stop the violence in Portland.



Dr. J. W. Matt Hennessee

How we did: 'C' The City has engaged California Partnership for Safe Communities since 2019 and has since received an assessment of the city's gun violence reduction efforts; the development of evidence-based community interventions; an analysis of local violence; and an analysis of the cost of violence to city and county residents. But it has never engaged California Partnership for Safe Communities to provide proactive violence intervention strategies, such as focused intervention or deterrence. We remain anxious for the City to engage California Partnership for Safe Communities to address these critical initiatives which remain undone.

3) Use an evidenced-based approach to intervening in gun violence that employs strategies proven to be effective, such as engaging California Partnership for Safe Communities with which the City already has a contract.

How we did: 'A' Beginning as a concept the year before last, the FIT/COG (Focused Intervention Team / Community Oversight Group) is now a reality. The COG is made up of a group of highly-engaged community members who are actively vetting evidenced based strategies to reduce gun violence alongside and with the Portland Police Bureau. Further, the SSPDX program announced as part of the Mayor's 2022 state of emergency declaration is actively collecting data on its methods and outcomes as part of its evidenced-based approach.

4) Have the active engagement of all city bureaus in

life-saving initiatives such as the community 'Listening Sessions' and 'The Table' offered by IPAC (the Interfaith Peace & Action Collaborative) and the Portland Peace Initiative.

How we did: 'A' During 2022, a total of six events called 'The Table' were held along with multiple community 'Listening Sessions' by IPAC in cooperation with PPI. These events actively included personnel from multiple city bureaus and focused on reducing gun violence and the City's response to gun violence.

5) Convene a recurring 'Table' event of city, county, state and Federal law enforcement leaders, as well as city council, and county council staff and media with the charge to meet weekly to identify and continuously recommend immediate action steps to end violence in Portland and adjoining communities, facilitated by a representative from the Portland Peace Initiative.

How we did: 'B' In all, three unique conversations were held weekly which included city, county, state and Federal law enforcement leaders, as well as city council, and county council staff and media to identify and recommend immediate action steps to end violence in Portland. But three times in a year is not weekly, and we look forward to next year when such meetings are regular and frequent.

6) Have City Council members reach out to the US DOJ for program support and ask to become a part of the Public Safety Partnership program which coordinates Federal agencies for cities experiencing high violence.

How we did: 'C' While Mayor Ted Wheeler announced the City's intention to apply for the Public Safety Partnership program in 2022, the City of Portland was not among those cities selected for Federal assistance as part of this program. But there was still a great deal of coordination between the City of Portland and its Federal partners this year, and we look forward to next year and a renewal of this partnership.

7) Similar to the Office of Violence

Prevention's video, launch a separate website that memorializes all gun violence victim deaths and shootings detailing when, where, and who if known.

How we did: 'C' While the City of Portland did not launch such a website, one exists which was created by the National Gun Violence Memorial, a national nonprofit which memorializes victims of gun violence around the country. The website created for Portland can be found here: <https://gunmemorial.org/OR/portland>

8) Convene a 'Table' event of business and community groups to recommend immediate actions to end gun violence.

How we did: 'A' In all, 'The Table' was held a total of six times all of which included business and community groups which recommended immediate actions to end gun violence. We look forward to continuing such gatherings into 2023 and beyond.

9) Identify the cities in the U.S. that have been successful currently in reducing murder and violent crime to understand what they did that worked.

How we did: 'A' Personnel from the City, the Portland Police Bureau, and the FIT/ COG team traveled to multiple cities this year, including Tampa, Florida and Oakland, California, in coordination with California Partnership for Safe Communities. The purpose was to review the technology being employed by these other cities for its effectiveness in reducing gun violence, such as gunshot detection systems.

10) After these initial responses are in place, City Council members can spend more time working on long term strategies to end gun violence—but right now, the focus must remain on stopping the bloodshed on the streets of Portland.

How we did: 'B+' As a city, we're still in the space of trying to get our response to the crisis of gun violence right. But as a community, we're heartened by the renewed focus which the city council and the new city council members are placing on actively coming up with solutions. We're

identifying and planning purchases for life-saving technologies which will help address gun violence. And we have good working relationships with our federal partners. All of these efforts put us in a much better place than last year at this time.

While the progress made during 2022 was significant, it's clear that a redoubling of efforts and focus is needed. Far from being unique among American communities suffering from violence, Portland is one of several major cities facing similarly crucial issues. What remains unique about Portland is how community members have banded together, pooled resources, tapped private funding sources, and launched initiatives alongside City-led responses to gun violence.

"When you have a vision for a better future, you've got to hang on to it and never let it go," said Rev. Dr. J.W. Matt Hennessee. "That's what we've done this past year, in concert with the City and other community-led nonprofits." In addition to being Senior Servant of Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church, Rev. Hennessee is also President of the six-year-old Interfaith Peace & Action Collaborative (IPAC), which became an Oregon 501c3 nonprofit this year. "We incorporated so that we could more effectively deliver on our vision for a safer, peaceful Portland free from the crisis of gun violence," he continued.

"We continue to be shaken to the core of our souls," said Antionette Edwards, Community Elder and former Director of the Office of Youth Violence Prevention. "But this last year's response showed a strength of resolve that encourages and inspires hope. By this time next year, I know that the actions we have taken will move us closer to our goal of non-violent conflict resolution. As I said one year ago, there is hope when we do the work together."

Next steps for IPAC and the Portland Peace Initiative include a seventh event called 'The Table' to be held virtually in January with a seventh report to be published in February.

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