

PORTLAND COPWATCH TESTIMONY REGARDING PROJECT RESPOND FUNDING

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To members of Portland City Council:

I am here to testify on the agenda item proposing to fund two more Project Respond mental health workers riding with Portland Police. While we aren't here to address the idea of the teaming up of the social workers with law enforcement, we do want to raise a few concerns about this item and some of its broader implications.

First and foremost is that the expansion of this program is part of the Agreement with the US Department of Justice around their excessive force findings regarding Portland Police and people in mental health crisis. While we cry out "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" and bemoan the slow pace at which change ordinarily occurs, we are concerned that many aspects of the Agreement are being implemented before Judge Michael Simon has held a "fairness hearing" and entered the Agreement into the court records. Other examples abound of the City jumping ahead to implement the plan, one of the most recent of which is the Auditor circulating a job description for "complaint investigators" to be hired in the "Independent" Police Review Division. We certainly have been supportive of the idea of IPR doing its own investigations over the years, but suggested that their investigators be funded with dollars originally allocated to Police Internal Affairs as a means to end the decades long practice of police investigating police. The Project Respond solution similarly could benefit from community input to address concerns and even if Council moves forward with this, we hope to hear a stated understanding that if the Judge approves changes to the Agreement, the City will work to implement those changes rather than saying "we already dealt with that, and here's how."

The second concern is the now deeply disconcerting integral relationship between the service provider, Cascadia Behavioral Health Care, and the Bureau, particularly around a controversial case of an officer involved shooting. In May 2010, officers pulled over young Keaton Otis because they thought he looked "like a gangster" wearing a hoodie on a warm spring day, and that he didn't seem right driving a nice Toyota, which it turns out was his mother's car. Oh, did I mention this was the Gang Enforcement Team and that Keaton Otis was African American? Perhaps that played into the traffic stop. Anyway, as you all know, the traffic stop ended with Keaton Otis dead with 23 police bullets in him, and Officer Chris Burley being wounded by one or two (it is still unclear) bullets to his legs. Burley had been at Otis' driver's side door trying to extract him by, among other things, punching him in the face.

Officer Burley is now a member of the Cascadia board of directors, whose chair is Felesia Otis, Keaton's mother. We did not realize that Capt. Donna Henderson, now an Assistant Chief, was previously on Cascadia's board. While there is a strong argument for the police to have a better understanding of mental health issues, it is of deep concern that a Bureau working its way through findings of unconstitutional practices is helping guide the area's largest mental health provider.

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