



June 22, 2020

Co-Chairs Courtney & Kotek
Co-Vice Chairs Girod & Drazan
Members of the Committee

RE: LC 78, LC 79, LC 80, LC 81, LC 83 & Recommendations on Reforms to Policing

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Oregon Chapter, we thank the Committee for taking up the vital work of rethinking how policing is performed in our state. NASW-OR feels that this discussion is long overdue, and would like to be a partner in providing the Committee recommendations on how to make policing safer and more effective for all Oregonians.

Social workers are the number one mental health provider in the country, but we do not just provide therapy in an office setting. Social workers are case managers serving Oregonians with addiction problems, and major mental health concerns like schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder. Social workers are crisis responders, working with EMTs in certain parts of the state to respond to 911 calls that involve mental health or addiction crises. Social workers serve Oregonians that are houseless, Oregonians that are at risk of becoming houseless, and Oregonians that are re-entering the community from prison or jail settings.

Social workers navigate our justice systems including jailing, policing, court, probation, our state-funded public health systems, our health insurance systems, and many more to ensure their clients have access to the resources that they need. On a daily basis, Social workers work their hardest to ensure that even the most at-risk Oregonians do not slip through the cracks of our system, or, in some cases, do not get further harmed by the barriers and discrimination built into our systems.

NASW-OR is in full support of the complete range of policing reforms that the Committee is considering today, including LC 78, LC 79, LC 80, LC 81, and LC 83. We believe that draconian practices like the ability to utilize chokeholds, as well as the use of munitions like tear gas, should be fully banned. We also believe that greater transparency in accountability measures will help address the instances of police use of excessive force, and requiring other officers to respond or intervene during instances of excessive force will allow officers the ability to hold each other accountable. We agree that the investigation of use of force should be completely independent from the workplace of the accused officer, and that there should be statewide database of law enforcement disciplinary actions.



We are glad that the Legislature has decided to take up this incredibly important public health issue, and we would like to also add some other recommendations.

Police are not social workers. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it begs the question- Why are we dispatching police officers in response to situations that call for a social work intervention? Issues of drug use, homelessness, mental illness, domestic disputes, landlord/tenant disagreements and related social service issues too frequently lead to police response. Tragically, as we have seen over and over, these calls lead to escalation instead of peaceful resolution and, particularly when persons of color are involved, harmful outcomes. If this were not the case, we would not be having calls for defunding the police and police reforms.

Recommendations on the Use of Social Workers

Calls to 911 need to be assessed as to who is the most appropriate responder. For calls related to social needs, there needs to be a unit populated by social workers and related professionals that can be the first responder. Eugene Oregon has a well-established program, Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets <https://whitebirdclinic.org/>, that is a mobile crisis unit handling certain calls that previously were handled by police. This can lead to improved outcomes at a lower financial cost, and a reduced cost to personal safety. In 2018, CAHOOTS handled 20% of the 911 calls in the Eugene and Springfield area, and managed to keep costs to \$800,000. In contrast, we spent 58 million on policing in the same year.

The statewide institution of this program would allow Oregonians with mental health concerns, addiction, anger issues, etc., to seek and access the resources that will aid them in their eventual healing. We all deserve dignity, and a law enforcement/public safety net system that does not abuse or discriminate against those that are in need.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Delmar de la Torre Stone, LMSW
Executive Director, Oregon Chapter
National Association of Social Workers