

HATFIELD RESIDENT FELLOWSHIP PROJECT BRIEF

Organizational Assessment to be used in the creation of a Strategic Plan for the Joint Community Safety Service Area – City of Portland

Project Dates: August/2023 – March/2024

PROJECT GOAL

In anticipation of the City of Portland’s charter transition, the four major public safety bureaus – Police, Fire, Emergency Communications (911) and Emergency [Disaster] Management – were asked to create a joint strategic plan for the community safety service area. The plan would guide integration of the bureaus as they transition to a city manager form of government, and prepare them to tackle the changing safety landscape in the City of Portland. A comprehensive Organizational Assessment of the bureaus was undertaken to provide a foundational understanding of the service area that would guide the Strategic Plan.

CHALLENGES

Organizational Assessments of this magnitude offer immense challenges on a practical level. The scale is the most immediate difficulty: collecting meaningful information on a service area with a budget of over \$482 million (23-24 fiscal year) and nearly 2,300 employees could quickly spiral out of control. Depending on the goals adopted, this piece alone, one among many in the strategic plan, could take years to complete. The team had to first design clear goals, guidelines, and boundaries to create a useful organizational assessment on a practical timeline. The challenge was to obtain information, both qualitative and quantitative, that addressed the current functioning of the bureaus in a meaningful way but was able to be compiled in a constrained time frame.

STRATEGY

As a team, we developed a strategic approach to the Organizational Assessment, one that would help us gather and synthesize as much information as possible in a time-constrained project, while also keeping this information organized and useful, and resist “going into the weeds.” The strategy is as follows:

- Decide on a cohesive goal. The adopted goal was to evaluate the service area *as a whole*, rather than evaluating individual bureaus, which would fail to adequately prepare for a joint strategic plan.
- Review all existing assessments undertaken in the last five years, amounting to nearly 900 pages of narrative-form data. These included bureau-commissioned studies, city audits, budget analysis, and internal memos, among other documents.
- Design a code, a standard practice in qualitative research, to glean relevant information from the existing assessments:
 - ‘SCOR’ standard: Strength, Constraint, Opportunity, Risk, to evaluate information on twelve chosen dimensions.
 - Twelve dimensions evaluated: Budget; Crisis Management and Preparedness; Planning; Decision-Making; Equity Work; Ecosystem; Staffing and Readiness; Performance Metrics; Communication; Administrative Effectiveness; Role of Public Safety; Efficacy/Structure of Advisory Bodies.
- Develop interview scripts for bureau directors based on learnings from the existing assessments focusing on items needing clarification or expansion.
- Conduct interviews and evaluate using the same code as above.
- Analyze and synthesize data into a comprehensive yet accessible narrative report, for use in the creation of a joint strategic plan.

RESULTS

Results are still being compiled and analyzed, but preliminary results reveal several high-level themes.

The service area has been challenged to keep pace with the community's rapidly-evolving needs. The sudden arrival of the fentanyl crisis overlapping with a 65% rise (since 2015) in unsheltered houselessness in the Portland area has left the housing and addiction service area overwhelmed, leaving emergency responders often the only resource for the public. This has severely challenged their working model, as they are more and more asked to respond to calls which are difficult to meaningfully resolve with traditional emergency-response measures. The perception within in the bureaus is that they have become a safety net or a "catch all" for Portland's social problems, leading to strain on staffing, morale, and budgets.

Budget reductions have an adverse impact on the ability of public safety bureaus to operate efficiently and effectively. The population of the Portland Metro Area, much of which is served by the bureaus and/or whose population is regularly in the City of Portland, has grown by 267,000 people in the past ten years, increasing strain on the service area. In the same period, the overall tax base for the City of Portland has fallen as the population of the city proper has shrunk and short-term pandemic-era funding (such as ARPA) is expiring. This has led to staffing cuts, especially in administrative roles, leading to an inability to focus on innovation and planning that could help the bureaus respond to the changing safety situation listed above. It has also meant an overreliance on the use of overtime to fill first-responder roles, creating a more expensive staffing model and a vicious cycle of budget overages.

Opportunity for structural changes to help increase the public safety bureaus' ability to serve the community. Changes in administrative structure opens opportunities for increased cooperation amongst the bureaus. Focus on promising innovations, such as non-traditional responses, have the potential to address the new realities the bureaus face in Portland. Using the charter transition as an opportunity to reduce silos and change the current competition incentives into better cooperation has the potential to address some of the above challenges without sole reliance on ever-increasing budgets.