

An Evolution of Policing: Building the Relationship-based Policing Model Salem Deserves

An Open Letter to the Community from Police Chief Trevor Womack

June 22, 2023

As I reflect upon my first two-and-a-half years as Chief of Police, I am struck by how far we have come as a team and the momentum gained in pursuit of our strategic goals and objectives. Our staff has remained steadfast in service of our community through a pandemic, major protests, extreme weather events, and increasing violent crime and assaults upon officers—all made more challenging by long-standing and persistent staffing challenges. Intensity and pressure, though, only seem to make Salem police employees stronger, which speaks to their resilience, character, and sense of duty.

In the face of a looming [budget shortfall](#), I remain optimistic about the future of public safety in Salem. We have highly competent people within our organization who are ready to meet any challenge, and the next generation now joining our ranks is infusing new perspectives and energy. They are all truly Salem's finest, committed to our stated mission: *Provide superior service to keep Salem safe while enhancing trust.* Safety and trust.

Uncertainty now surrounds the City's financial situation, with costs having outpaced revenues for years. Like other City departments, we stand at a crossroads. One path leads us further away from our vision and the other toward the policing model Salem deserves. Discussions of new, sustainable revenue have heightened awareness and raised questions, so I am taking this opportunity to clarify some recent reports and suppositions of what we aim to accomplish with the revenue options being considered.

Our Approach toward Policing

Our policing philosophy combines the concepts of smart policing and principled policing. Simply put, our work centers around improving safety and trust. We continually ask ourselves: *Will this improve safety for our community and one another while also building and maintaining trusting relationships?* Safety and trust are reflected in our [mission, vision, and values](#) and woven throughout [our three-year strategic plan](#), guiding us as we move the department forward.

3 STRATEGIC PRIORITY AREAS

Safety means keeping the community and employees safe.

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Legitimacy is the public's belief that those who are charged with enforcing the law are capable, qualified, effective, and trustworthy.

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Excellence reflects the quality the department strives to achieve through its continual efforts to be a professional, forward-thinking, and a modern police agency.

Through surveys, small group listening sessions, and a recent independent [Community Engagement Assessment](#), we learned about the type and level of policing our community needs and desires. The assessment confirmed our belief in a community-centered, relationship-based policing model, and provided numerous findings and recommendations which we quickly embraced and incorporated into our first strategic plan. The assessment also noted, however, that additional staff would be needed to implement that model fully and effectively.

Stagnant Staffing amidst Growing Demands

To better understand staffing needs, we commissioned an [independent staffing study](#), producing recommended efficiency measures which we again immediately began implementing. The report also identified the need for 27 to 83 more sworn officers ([p. 35](#)). From that assessment, we determined a need for 60 additional police officers, along with several critical non-sworn support positions.

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Per capita, we have fewer budgeted police officers today than we did 23 years ago. In 2000, there were 1.26 budgeted officer positions per one-thousand residents. Today, there are 1.1 per thousand. At our peak in [2011](#), there were 193 budgeted police officer positions. Today, there are 200 officers, an increase of just 3.6% from 2011, while Salem's population grew 15% and calls for service increased 17% in that time. Adding 60 officers would put us where we should be, around 1.5 officers per thousand residents, allowing for the robust community policing approach our neighbors have asked for and deserve.

While overall crime and property crime have remained relatively flat, the city's violent crime has steadily increased for years, up by 42% since 2008. Responding to and investigating violent crime is resource-intensive, drawing staff away from lower-level investigations and valuable community engagement and crime prevention efforts. More and more, patrol officers find themselves running from emergency call to emergency call, and detectives are consumed with major violent crime investigations at the expense of significant property crime casework.

Community safety, including traffic and pedestrian safety, is as important to residents as it is to us. We routinely receive requests for traffic enforcement throughout the city. Our traffic team comprises just seven officers dedicated to traffic enforcement and education for the entire city. Last year, the team investigated 14 tragic traffic fatalities. These are complex and time-intensive investigations, drawing focus away from important preventative work—focused traffic enforcement, school zone safety, commercial truck safety inspections, and everything in between connected to keeping our streets safe. We need more traffic officers to allow for more proactive, preventative traffic safety efforts.

Salem's looming fiscal crisis may seem sudden and unexpected to many, but for City staffers it has been present and impactful for many years. Budgetary limitations meant police staffing could not keep pace with our growing population and service demands, resulting in a slow but steady decline in services. I sometimes refer to this as "death by a thousand cuts," since continual, small adjustments over many years went mostly unnoticed by the broader community but resulted in a slow diminishing of needed services. More recent examples of "small adjustments" include reduced patrol staffing, reduced response to non-emergency calls, fewer property crime detectives (including the elimination of our last auto theft detective), and the elimination of the Public Relations Unit—which at its height comprised a police sergeant, five police officers, and support staff. Yes, our community is asking for more engagement, yet we were forced to eliminate the very unit that was dedicated to community outreach and engagement.

There is no more "fat" to trim within the police department. Further cuts will be noticeable and have significant implications for public safety in our community. Only two options remain: Significantly cut services to meet basic emergency call response demands or add personnel resources. Of course, adding personnel requires new, sustainable revenue. That debate is now well underway, and I encourage everyone to actively engage with city leaders on the topic.

Addressing the Need

Anticipating the shortfall, City leaders were on the verge of bringing forward an employee payroll tax to increase revenue just three years ago but halted with the emergence of the pandemic. Unprecedented one-time federal dollars received during the pandemic temporarily

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filled funding gaps, but the problem is once again squarely upon our shoulders and cannot be ignored. And this is not unique to Salem as other Oregon cities are experiencing similar budgetary challenges.

Over the past two years, Mayor Hoy, Council President Stapleton, and our city councilors have taken action to begin addressing critical public safety needs, including the authorization of 10 additional sworn positions, and seeking new sustainable revenue to stabilize and bolster police staffing. If implemented, the proposed employee payroll tax would prevent cuts and fund additional police positions, a substantial step forward for community policing in Salem.

Where We are Headed

Community policing involves three key components: partnerships, organizational change, and problem-solving. Additional officers would allow us to continue moving forward with each. An example would include the creation of geographically assigned teams dedicated to problem-solving in partnership with our residents. They would be removed from standard 9-1-1 emergency call response—a reactive response; and instead, remain focused on community engagement and crime prevention efforts—a proactive approach. Our existing downtown team of bicycle officers is an example of a community policing team. We need more time and resources for community-centered, relationship-based policing, not less.

For years, our bicycle team was fully dedicated to working in the downtown area, getting to know business operators and residents, and collaboratively problem-solving crime and safety issues. However, because staffing has not kept pace with growing service demands, they are now frequently drawn into other areas of the city to address violent crime. Without an infusion of staffing, this team, like others, will eventually be absorbed back into routine patrol staffing for emergency call handling. New, sustainable revenue would stabilize this team and create two others. Having three such teams would exponentially expand relationship-based policing throughout Salem. This is critically important for improving both safety and police-community trust.

Community policing also means strong collaboration around the issue of homelessness, the top priority identified by our residents in annual surveys and called out within the Community Engagement Assessment. Police are not the solution, but we are a key stakeholder and need a seat at the table as we develop the complex, cross-boundary solutions this crisis demands. We see ourselves as collaborators and conveners in this area, with specific interest and responsibility to ensure the safety of everyone involved: the unsheltered, service providers, our community, and our staff themselves.

We now convene monthly service provider meetings with various outreach teams here in our facility to share information and coordinate effective strategies for the most at-risk and high need individuals. Our focus is not to arrest anyone — understanding arrest is not the answer absent serious criminal behavior — but to safely connect those in need to the right services at the right time. Our two Homeless Services Team (HST) officers lead this effort. These two new positions were authorized by the Mayor and City Council last year and the results have been impressive.

Engagement with those in highest need and connections with service providers is increasing. This year, HST officers have engaged with unsheltered individuals over 1,000 times at hundreds

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of unmanaged campsites throughout Salem, making nearly 300 referrals to services. Many are suffering from addiction, behavioral health issues, or both, and need immediate access to resources during brief windows of opportunity when they are ready. The relationships developed by our HST officers provide another avenue for those connections to happen safely, quickly, and effectively.

HST is part of the City's new Salem Outreach and Livability Services [\(SOS\) Team](#), which helps to mitigate sanitation and hygiene concerns associated with unmanaged encampments throughout Salem. New sustainable revenue would fund two additional HST officer positions, allowing for seven-day-a-week outreach alongside SOS.

Increasing Safety and Trust Together

I appreciate this opportunity to provide you with information and context to the challenging, but significant, issues we are facing.

This is truly a galvanizing time for policing in Salem. We are entering a new era in policing and your police department is committed to remaining at the forefront of change. We have the right vision, the right plan to get there, and are making good progress. As a city, overcoming our financial hurdles is crucial for full delivery of the community-centered, relationship-based policing model our community needs and deserves. Together, we can increase both safety and trust.

Thank you for the continued honor of serving as your Chief of Police.



Salem Police Chief Trevor Womack