

# Racial Equity Steering Committee begins looking at systemic racism in Portland

[pressherald.com/2020/11/04/racial-equity-steering-committee-begins-looking-at-systemic-racism-in-portland/](https://www.oregonlive.com/pressherald.com/2020/11/04/racial-equity-steering-committee-begins-looking-at-systemic-racism-in-portland/)

By Michael Kelley  
The Forecaster

November 4, 2020



The Racial Equity Steering Committee, seen here Oct. 22, is meeting weekly until the end of January, when it is slated to recommend changes to the city's public safety policies, structures and procedures that disproportionately impact people of color. *ZOOM video*

PORTLAND —The Racial Equity Steering Committee recently began its work, but is already feeling crunched for time after being asked to make recommendations by the end of January.

The group was formed by the city council in September in response to calls from the community to reallocate funding from the police budget to social service agencies.

The committee, which includes 13 members who all have previous racial equity work experience, is being tasked to look at the expanding role of police officers and the types of calls they respond to, the way the city and police officers interact with social service organizations and recommendations for public safety policies, structures and procedures that disproportionately impact people of color.

Whether the group should soon ask for an extension or wait until closer to the deadline when more work has been accomplished has divided members.

“It is a small amount of time to do the work that is so important for this community,” committee member Peter O’Donnell said at an Oct. 29 meeting.

Committee member Jonathan Sahrbeck said earlier this month he is not in favor of asking

for an extension yet.

“Sometimes working under a deadline like this can be a good thing. It can get people moving. That sense of urgency can get things done,” he said at an Oct. 22 meeting.

Ali Abdul also doesn’t feel the urge to ask for an extension right now.

“I think we should get into the work and if things are deeper and we need more time, we can request it,” he said Oct. 22.

Last week the group overwhelmingly agreed the role of the police department is too broad and called into question whether officers should be responding to things like behavioral and mental health calls and public intoxication.

Suheir Alaskari said police officers are being asked to do more than just enforce the laws.

“We give a lot of responsibility to police officers. It really is too broad,” she said.

Fellow committee member Kate Knox agreed.

“We are asking a criminal justice organization to respond to non-criminal justice issues, in my opinion,” Knox said.

Sahrbeck said he would like to see a breakdown of the type of incidents police are being called to.

“Unless it is from patrol activity and officers are actually driving around and seeing something happen right in front of them, most of (their work) is, they are called somewhere for a specific reason. I want to understand what they are being called for,” he said.

Committee Co-Chair Pious Ali is curious if there is any data available that looks at whether the presence of a uniformed officer, either a police officer or a firefighter, impacts how situations escalate or de-escalate.

Committee member Deborah Ibonwa said she needs a better understanding of the training officers get in law enforcement versus crisis response, while Jerome Bennett said he would like to understand the rationale of what areas of the city are prioritized for monitoring and how beats are developed.

Abdul said before he can make any sort of recommendations, he would like to see a copy of the police department’s budget over the last decade, as well as how the department’s makeup compares to that of Portland’s racial makeup and the demographics of arrests made.

The committee meets next on Friday, Nov. 6.

Comments are not available on this story.

[« Previous](#)

[Dion captures Portland City Council seat, Irish wins school board election in District 5](#)

[Next »](#)

[Creative Portland using art to remind public of health protocols](#)

© 2020