



## **Ted Wheeler, Multnomah County Chair**

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## **Local Justice System Under Strain: Major Study Outlines Plan to Improve Public Safety**

Today, Multnomah County Chair Ted Wheeler released an unprecedented top-to-bottom review of the local criminal justice system that raises troubling concerns about the toll successive budget cuts have taken on a system once nationally-renowned for its effectiveness. At the same time, the report identifies a detailed set of short-term and long-term steps that leaders can take to strengthen the justice system.

The “Multnomah County Public Safety System Planning Report” is the result of a six-month study that brought together judges, police officers, prosecutors, parole officers, victims advocates, treatment providers and other public safety experts to identify gaps in the system and to prioritize investments that are most likely to reduce crime. It was commissioned by the County Chair and Commissioners and overseen by a core work group made up of policy analysts, managers and subject matter experts.

The report notes that while crime rates are down and parolees and probationers re-offend at dramatically lower rates than they did a decade ago, the impact of budget reductions may soon translate into increased crime.

According to judges, police officers and other experts who were interviewed, the local justice system no longer “has the infrastructure necessary to sufficiently manage the offender population.” The report highlights the lack of jail alternatives, drug treatment beds and mental health services as examples of gaps that could improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the justice system.

“Public safety professionals agree that the most critical gaps are mental health and substance-abuse treatment options as well as more productive alternatives to expensive jail beds,” Wheeler said. “This is where we should look to focus our resources to reduce crime. The study underscores the need to get the treatment capacity of the Wapato Jail online as soon as possible.”

The study relied on a core work group made up of policy analysts, managers and subject matter experts to complete an analysis of the current system and a list of 53 specific proposals for improvements to public safety. A planning committee chaired by Presiding Judge Dale Koch of the Multnomah County Circuit Court developed criteria and desired outcomes and used those to select priorities from the 53 proposals.

Priorities are presented in two groups. Eleven proposals are identified as “Short-Term Priorities” that can be accomplished in the next year. Six “Long-Term Priorities” require both additional planning and a substantial increase in funding.

Some examples of short-term priorities include:

- Transition individuals with acute and chronic diseases out of the jails
- Evaluate a specialized mental health court
- Fully implement video arraignment
- Continue work on two different initiatives to improve data sharing between agencies
- Plan for improved mental health and substance abuse treatment services

Long term priorities identified include:

- Enhance mental health system services, including a sub-acute treatment center
- Add both secure and community-based substance abuse treatment beds
- Augment transition services for offenders leaving jail
- Fully implement mental health court and data sharing initiatives
- Hire additional victims’ advocates

More than two hundred individuals participated in meetings and discussions that supported the study. Many were front-line public safety professionals; others were managers, elected officials, crime victims or ex-offenders. More than a thousand people participated in an online survey that provided additional input to the study. [The Crime and Justice Institute](#) provided staff to coordinate the study and write the final report.

“This is a roadmap for strengthening the community’s public safety system and reducing crime,” Wheeler noted. “I am deeply grateful for the participation of Judge Dale Koch, District Attorney Mike Schrunk, Portland Police Chief Rosie Sizer, Gresham Police Chief Carla Piluso and many others who worked together to identify these priorities and who will continue to work together to implement them.”

This spring, the Multnomah County Board of County Commissioners will vote on a budget that must make additional reductions in county spending. “While these priorities will be considered, it will be very hard to make substantial progress in implementation without additional revenue. We’ll consider asking voters to support a local-option levy in November that could accelerate progress on these priorities and substantially improve community safety,” Wheeler said.

The results of the study will be formally presented to the Multnomah County Board of County Commissioners at a briefing scheduled for January 15, beginning at 10 AM in the Commission’s meeting room at 501 SE Hawthorne. The public is invited. The full text of the report plus a supplementary volume on the “State of the System” is available online at [www.co.multnomah.or.us/cha](http://www.co.multnomah.or.us/cha) .

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