Project Update: Reimagining Public Safety

Overview

The City launched the "Reimagining Public Safety" process in July 2021 to evaluate and make recommendations that will ensure the City's public safety system is just, equitable, and without bias. Although many far-reaching societal factors influence public safety in general, this process looks specifically at the City's public safety system as it exists today and envisions what it could be in the future.

A Community Work Group made up of community members who represent a cross-section of Olympia's demographics, expertise, and experiences is leading this effort. The Work Group's role is to learn about the City's public safety system, hold listening-and-learning sessions with community members, and reflect what they learn in a set of recommendations to the City Council.

Data Collection

Community input has been collected in two primary ways:

1. **Listening-and-Learning Sessions**
   These sessions were hosted in a small group discussion format and were designed for both broad and targeted audiences to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and ideas from throughout the community.
   - Olympia Community Members
   - Neighborhoods
   - Non-profit Organizations, Community Organizers, and Advocates
   - Business and Property Owners
   - People of Color
   - Faith Community Members
   - Transgender Women
   - Individuals experiencing houselessness
   - Individuals receiving housing assistance
   - Public Safety Staff (individual sessions for each):
     - Police Department
     - Fire Department
     - Municipal Court
     - Public Defenders
     - Prosecution
     - Homeless Response Team

2. **A Community-Wide Survey**
   - 343 responses collected April 11 through June 6.

City of Olympia

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Input has been collected around the following questions:

Question 1: What do you feel is working well and what do you feel is not working well?

Question 2: What is something the City can do (or do differently, or do more of) today or in the near term?

Question 3: How will you know that the City is making progress in improving the public safety system? What will that look and feel like to you?

High-Level Summary of Community Input

The following is a high-level summary of the input collected from listening-and-learning sessions and survey responses through June 9.

- It's important to recognize that this data update is only meant to provide a window into what has been heard thus far and that these could change as more data is collected.
- The items below are listed in alphabetical order and do not reflect intensity or weight.
- As much as possible, the input is presented in the words used by session participants and survey respondents. However, not all individual comments are reflected here.

Question 1: With respect to Olympia's public safety system, what do you feel is working well and what do you feel is not working well?

What's working well:
- City's financial support for public safety.
- City's use of Clean Team, Community Court, Crisis Response Units (CRU), Downtown Ambassadors, and Familiar Faces to address some public safety issues.
- Efforts by the city to change approaches to criminal justice and public safety.
- Increased focus on mental health issues in the community, especially in relationship to crime and houselessness.
- Olympia Police Department (OPD) response times.
- Outreach from the City, including more public engagement in efforts to address complex issues like public safety and houselessness, and efforts to increase awareness of public safety policy changes.
- Quality of OPD work under changing and challenging conditions.
- Nothing/not much is working well.

What's *not* working well:
- Current approaches to criminal behavior, drug use, and houselessness have resulted in people not feeling safe.
- Houselessness is reaching a level that is impacting all aspects of public safety and quality of life in the city.
- Lack of consistency in application of laws.

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What's *not* working well (continued)

- Lack of focus on the linkages between crime, houselessness, mental health, and substance abuse issues.
- Lack of understanding about what is meant by "public safety."
- Lack of visible presence of OPD.
- Property crimes are not being given enough attention.
- Need for people who violate laws to be held more accountable, and for OPD to be able to do law enforcement.
- Quality of relationship between community, public safety professionals, and City leaders/staff on addressing public safety.
- Too much leniency for houseless individuals and others who are breaking laws and negatively impacting the quality of life in Olympia.

Question 2: With respect to Olympia's public safety system, what is something the City can do (or do differently, or do more of) today or in the near term?

- A more integrated or holistic approach to public safety that is built on the relationship between issues like houselessness, mental health, and substance abuse.
- Commit more resources to helping people who need help, especially those suffering from mental health issues.
- Expand the Downtown Ambassador program (more days, longer hours)
- Keep the community involved in decision making about public safety.
- Less tolerance for people who break laws.
- More acknowledgment of the public safety challenges in Olympia.
- More collaboration with communities and neighborhoods in the city, as well as with other governments (municipal and state).
- More robust program to keep the city clean (garbage and graffiti).
- OPD needs to have obstacles removed that prevent them from enforcing laws.

Question 3: With respect to public safety in Olympia, how will you know that the City is making progress in improving the public safety system? What will that look and feel like to you?

- Crime in Olympia is not normalized, and people returned to being shocked or surprised when hearing about a crime in the city.
- Feeling more partnership with government leaders and City staff instead of feeling at odds to address complex issues like public safety.
- Feeling more trust that the City will do what is right for all people in Olympia, both those who need protection and those who need to be held accountable for their actions.

- General sense of safety, such as feeling safe walking around the city.
- Improved crime data/statistics.
- Increased sense of pride associated with the City of Olympia – as a business owner, as a resident, and with regards to public safety in the city.
- Less garbage/trash and graffiti around the city.
- Appropriate public safety interventions/responses: OPD when appropriate, CRU when appropriate, and not having too little or too much response.
- Seeing fewer houseless encampments.
- Seeing more people out and about in the city, especially downtown.

What We Are Hearing

There are seven general observations that cut across all questions to varying degrees. They are listed in random order and do not reflect intensity of experiences, perceptions, or responses.

1. Participants across all groups, expressed the value that could come from having a more comprehensive or holistic approach to addressing public safety issues.

2. Participants across all groups expressed a desire for more honest and open discussions about the state of public safety in Olympia.

3. A consistent indicator of the City succeeding in improving public safety, across all groups, would be less graffiti, trash, and vandalism.

4. A desire for an increased sense of pride (general and civic) associated with the state of public safety in Olympia was expressed by participants across all groups.

5. Respondents and participants consistently focused on the value that would come from improving the quality of relationships between the City and community leaders. The development of authentic and engaging collaborations to address public safety and other complex issues would be the strongest indicator of effective relationship building.

6. Across all groups, participants expressed the value that could come from having a shared definition and understanding of "public safety" in Olympia.

7. While not expressed by all participants, but was expressed in each group, the word "accountability" was invoked in connection to two sentiments (a) criminal laws have been diluted and (b) there is a need for more personal responsibility to be required of those committing criminal behavior.