

Mayor Ted Wheeler
State of Emergency to Address the Fentanyl Crisis
Remarks delivered January 30, 2024

Last week, I announced several promising trends in the 2023 crime data resulting from our work to bolster public safety initiatives.

Overall, crime in Portland continues to go down, significantly so in some key categories.

From 2022 to 2023, we saw a 23% reduction in homicides as well as significant reductions in auto theft, property crimes, and gun violence.

Additionally, Downtown Portland Clean & Safe recently announced a 10% year-over-year increase in Downtown foot traffic.

In many respects, we're trending in the right direction.

However, we are up against a rising tide of fentanyl-related addiction and deaths that are unlike anything we've seen before.

Fentanyl is one of the greatest threats of our generation and I know that Governor Kotek and Chair Vega Pederson share my concern about the magnitude of this crisis.

The direct effects of fentanyl are undeniable and far-reaching.

As the Chair mentioned, Multnomah County has seen deaths attributable to synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, rise 533% between 2018 and 2022.

Even more concerning: homeless individuals are 37 times more likely to die from a drug overdose; and these trends are only getting worse each year.

While fentanyl has created a national crisis, it has had a disproportionate impact on Portland's Central City, and particularly on our public safety system.

Fentanyl wreaks havoc on the people in its grips, often rendering them lifeless on our sidewalks.

It also begets violence among those who bring this deadly poison into our city.

This devastation and trauma unfolds on the doorsteps of homes, businesses, and in the streets, impacting nearly everyone in some way.

First responders rarely, if ever, go a shift without responding to at least one overdose or a welfare check on a person in crisis.

I have personally been out on calls with first responders and witnessed these individuals being literally brought back to life with the use of Narcan.

Clearly, we must come together to address this crisis on all fronts.

Over the last few years my administration has led multiple efforts to alleviate some of the numerous effects of the fentanyl crisis.

In the last two years, I have issued a series of five Emergency Declarations to streamline our ability to respond to Portland's most pressing problems head-on.

We have learned a great deal since the City began its emergency operations related to homelessness, livability, and crime, much of which has direct application to the fentanyl response we'd like to see come from these emergency orders.

For example, when my team and I created and activated the Street Services Coordination Center through an Emergency Declaration in March 2022, we were able to break down silos and align city bureaus under one command structure.

Each part of the system united to ensure a legal, practical, and compassionate response that meets the needs of the community.

We have been able to centralize how people can access services and provide them with the foundation to transition into stable housing.

The results are in: this model works. Nearly 100 people have been housed from our first Temporary Alternative Shelter Site location since mid-October.

Other City efforts include a pilot partnership between Portland Police's Central Bike Squad and professionals from the Mental Health & Addiction Association of Oregon, who work together to connect vulnerable people with resources in real-time.

Another example is Portland Fire & Rescue's buprenorphine (bu·preh·NOR·feen) pilot program, through which first responders can deliver on-scene medical treatment for opioid overdose, as well as coordinate referrals for ongoing care for substance use disorders.

These concrete steps are just a few examples of what effective partnership can look like when coordination among City and County programs is strengthened.

My administration also participated in the Portland Central City Task Force in the hopes of advocating for new State and County resources to bolster our continuing efforts to improve our community.

I have asked for additional Oregon State Police officers, a ban on the public use of drugs, sobering and stabilization facilities, and an increase in supportive outreach services in partnership with our first responders.

I want to thank the Governor for collaborating on increased OSP presence downtown in partnership with PPB. This added support, even sporadically, has been a very successful partnership and I would like to see it expand.

Likewise, I know there are many efforts underway to address the public use of drugs and the imperative need for a stabilization center, which I continue to support.

I also appreciate the recommendations that came from the Central City Task Force and believe that based on the strong results we've seen from our emergency systems approach, the City has established a solid foundation upon which we can build.

However, I have always been clear that the City cannot sustain this positive progress alone and we need our government partners to be able to scale the solution to the problem.

Long-term success demands increased collaboration among the City, the County, and the State.

I have called for support from all levels of government to help us address the fentanyl crisis in Portland for the last two years, and I am grateful that my call to action has been heard and echoed through the Task Force recommendations.

I am pleased to have Governor Kotek and Chair Vega Pederson join the City's ongoing efforts to address the deadly fentanyl crisis impacting our community.

Today, we move forward with urgency to address these challenges together under the authority of emergency declarations.

This is exactly the type of coordinated action needed to make a direct impact and a lasting difference.

I am appointing Mike Myers as the City's Incident Commander. Mike is a proven leader who has demonstrated time and again his ability to build teams and find solutions. Mike has led through emergencies at Community Safety Division, the Bureau of Emergency Management, and as a former Fire Chief, both in Portland and in Las Vegas. He will work closely with my Director of Community Safety, Stephanie Howard, in this effort.

Unified command teams from the City, State, and County have already begun meeting to put this strategy together and bring a diverse combination of backgrounds and perspectives to find solutions.

Over the next 90 days, we will focus on creating stronger systems of coordination for a more focused and immediate set of changes in the beating heart of our city.

The City will continue acting with urgency to better connect our public safety and first response systems with behavioral health professionals to immediately and effectively intervene with those impacted by fentanyl.

Through this partnership, I believe we can do many things, including create a centralized resources for real-time information sharing on available treatment and shelter beds, as well as a system to coordinate outreach efforts among the many good people trying to reach those most in need.

This 90-day response is a huge step toward achieving a consistent, unified system that will allow us to effectively deliver these critical community services.

The unified command teams are working to establish metrics and reporting mechanisms to ensure these efforts are transparent, and there will be more information to come in the next few weeks.

Each of us brings tools and expertise in distinct aspects of governance, all of which are necessary for a holistic and lasting impact.

It is time for solutions and action, and I look forward to moving this critical work forward. Together.