

Statement from Mark Schorr  
Mental Health Alliance  
August 24, 2021

My name is Mark Schorr and I've been a licensed professional counselor and certified addictions counselor for 30 years.

I am here as one of the 18 members of the Mental Health Alliance. I will be reading a statement which I co-authored with Amanda Marshall, an attorney and fellow MHA member.

People struggling with mental health or substance abuse symptoms are not going to be as responsive to police as an unimpaired citizen. This leads to confrontations which often lead to tragedy.

The body count continues to rise in Portland while the city government fumbles about, failing to meet the rules set forward by this court.

At the last court hearing, members from the Subcommittee for People with Mental Illness of the PCCEP stood in front of your honor and testified about how the voices of people with lived experience were not being heard, including specific examples of our own experiences, despite the measures put in place that the City and the DOJ insisted were substantially compliant with the settlement agreement.

We are two former members of the PCCEP subcommittee that left that group in disgust and came to work on the Mental Health Alliance Work Group. Group members have all been touched by mental illness, either having their own diagnosis or a close family member with a diagnosis. Members are attorneys, mental health professionals, clergy and/or long-time advocates. Organizational members include Disability Rights Oregon, Mental Health Association of Portland, Oregon Justice Resource Center, and Portland Interfaith Clergy Resistance. Many members of our group are also members of other advocacy or public interest groups that focus on the civil rights of people with a mental health diagnosis.

The Mental Health Alliance Work Group meets weekly, for 90 minutes, usually beginning with a 30 to 45-minute presentation/discussion involving a guest speaker. Presenters have included attorneys ranging from the Multnomah County DA to the ACLU to state court judges; mental health program administrators; police; journalists and other concerned parties. Having guests each week allows the group to explore new ideas and new solutions to chronic problems such as safely getting an emergency response to a mental health crisis, alternatives to taking people in crisis to jail, and better access to outpatient treatment to lessen the amount of mental health crises that need emergency responses.

We subsequently discuss issues and reach a decision by consensus. Group members will then write op-ed pieces, speak to legislators, assist in preparation of legal briefs as amici, appear in court and act as advocates for those with mental health and addictions problems.

We consistently hear from speakers how broken the system is, and how some are resigned to seeing it not change. Week after week, we hear great ideas and meet highly motivated people striving to create change, who have met resistance or flat out rejection to their proposed solution.

This is where the court is essential in saying “No, this is not okay.” There are many reasons the system has gotten as broken as it is, but that is unacceptable. People with mental illness will continue to be the victims in police shootings until there is more than lip service to making significant changes.

We need the pressure of the court to force more energy to be put into change, more money committed to outreach and peer run programs, better training and enforcement of that training in the police force and facilities other than the emergency room or jail for people in crisis.

We recognize that most police officers are well intentioned and don't seek to actively persecute and perpetuate violence against the mentally ill. But they are the hammer and everyone becomes a nail. The city needs to employ more and better tools to keep from brutalizing more of those struggling with mental health and addictions symptoms.

We need the city to know that despite all their excuses, they are way behind on doing all that should be done to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.