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AG Lynch Comes To Portland To Highlight Settlement With Police

by **Conrad Wilson** (</contributor/conrad-wilson/>) OPB | March 3, 2016 5:12 p.m. | Updated: March 3, 2016 6:13 p.m. | Portland



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Attorney General of the United States Loretta Lynch visits the Blazers Boys and Girls Club in NE Portland, March 3, 2016. Lynch is in Portland to highlight community policing partnerships here -- one of six cities that her office has chosen as public safety role models.

Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch visited Portland on Thursday to discuss the settlement between the city's police bureau and her agency while leading a conversation about community policing.

In August 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Portland Police Bureau reached a settlement regarding police actions toward people with mental illness.

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Lynch's visit comes at a time when the national conversation about police use of force has taken on urgency, especially in the wake of high profile police shootings like Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

And Portland isn't immune.

The 2014 settlement between the city and DOJ was linked to the death of African-American man Aaron Campbell during a welfare check. Campbell was reportedly suicidal. In 2012, a Portland police officer shot and killed Campbell, and a grand jury found the officer did nothing wrong.

The settlement proposed a series of reforms — and deadlines — on issues like the use of stun guns, assessing police based on their use of force, and the pace of misconduct investigations. It also created a new behavioral unit within the Police Bureau, which Lynch wanted to highlight.

“This issue of how we interact with the mentally ill community, how we provide the resources to stay out of the criminal justice arena and get help instead is the challenge of law enforcement today,” Lynch said during a community policing forum in Northeast Portland.

She said the DOJ chose to highlight Portland because the city has taken on the job of improving relations between the community and law enforcement.

Lynch told the crowd, which included community groups, pastors, police officers and politicians, that they tend to see the DOJ when bad things happen between police and the community.

“But it just as important for you to see us throughout the implementation of this agreement,” Lynch said. “Just as we would not wait until the end of the term to tell you that Portland was not doing well, we don't want to wait until the end to tell you where Portland is doing well.”

One of the main areas Lynch said Portland was doing well was the police bureau's new behavioral unit.

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Portland Police Chief Larry O'Dea said the department's work has put it at the forefront of crisis response. And while the agency has made strides, he acknowledged that more needs to be done.

"This work doesn't end for us with a positive report card from the Department of Justice," he said. "It's a journey, not a destination."

Lynch's visit comes as morale at the Portland Police Bureau is low because of low staffing levels and surging gang violence, among other reasons.

Lt. Tasha Hager, who heads up the behavioral unit, said patrol officers make about a thousand referrals to the unit ever year. But she said the unit only has the capacity to work about half of the cases.

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