

For true public safety, we need accountability for SPD's overtime spending

City Council's most recent proposal does not hold SPD accountable for misconduct and misses a critical opportunity to address systemic public safety issues.

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By Peter Condit¹ and Emma Lower²

The City Council is squandering an opportunity to improve public safety in Seattle. Two weeks ago, the Public Safety and Human Services Committee voted to amend legislation in a way that permits SPD to spend more on overtime than allowed in its budget. The action backtracks on unanimous resolutions from last August and December to hold SPD accountable for violence against protesters by no longer paying for unbudgeted overtime.

The Seattle Police Department's overtime spending has been [cited by the ACLU-WA as a public safety issue](#). During the weeks following George Floyd's death, there were 15,000 complaints of SPD misconduct and a joint [lawsuit](#) arguing that SPD used excessive force in violation of the fourth amendment. SPD's overtime costs totaled [\\$6.3M](#) in just the 12 days between May 29 and June 9. Studies show that racial biases are [exacerbated](#) amongst fatigued officers, and according to Council President González, "the reality is that the Police Department effectively has a blank check as it relates to [overtime](#)."

SPD ended 2020 having spent \$5.4M more on overtime than they were budgeted. Due to legal obligations, Council was forced to pay that difference from the general fund in December, but they simultaneously introduced [legislation](#) to remove an equivalent amount from the SPD's 2021 budget. The action was meant to restore budget accountability and signal an end to the annual "blank check." Moreover, the 2021 dollars taken from SPD would be transferred to a community-led process to address systemic causes of harm through [participatory budgeting](#). Participatory budgeting centers the voices and needs of people most

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impacted by police violence and awards funding to programs that address housing, mental health, youth, economic, and nonviolent crisis and wellness needs.

Council's resolve on the issue has recently wavered. On March 23, 2021, Councilmember Herbold, chair of the Public Safety and Human Services Committee, significantly [amended](#) the legislation to allow SPD to keep a majority of its overspending. Moreover, this bill allows SPD to receive up to \$5 million in funding during the year to cover additional budget requests if they submit monthly staffing reports, hardly an equivalent to the firm stance of refusing to fund overtime spending.

Council's capitulation is a loss for police accountability. It signals a willingness to allow over-policing of protesters and residents, which threatens our democratic rights and especially endangers Black and Brown people, who suffer disproportionately from police violence.

Some may be concerned that SPD is now under-funded, so it is important to be clear: SPD's officer staffing has been and continues to be fully-funded. SPD's [proposed](#) budget agenda is largely ancillary to officer staffing; it includes civilian positions, information technology, and upgrades to evidence storage facilities. At the March 23 committee meeting, Council Member Lewis [said](#) "there is widespread confusion amongst members of the public and amongst certain editorial boards... that what we are debating right now is going to have a tangible impact on patrol members, and it won't."

Additionally, transferring \$5.4 million out of SPD would not impact SPD's emergency response capacity. SPD's own data shows that average 911 [response times](#) for highest priority calls in 2020 and 2021 are comparable or better than response times from the past decade. Average response times for second priority calls have been increasing steadily over the last decade, but plateau in the most recent two years. Calls below these priority levels are by definition not urgent and do not impact public safety.

The next discussion of this bill will likely take place on April 13th. An amendment will be necessary to restore the bill to its original intent and hold SPD fully accountable for their \$5.4M

in overspending. Anything less enables continued misconduct. As constituents and residents of Seattle, we must ensure Council takes public safety seriously. By making our concerns about budget accountability known, we can move Seattle towards improved public safety for all.

The next meeting of the Public Safety and Human Services Committee is on April 27th at 9:30 am.