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The Oregonian

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Oct. 3, 2018

To the members of the Oregon Sunshine Committee:

My name is Rebecca Woolington, and I am a reporter on the investigative team at The Oregonian covering law enforcement and justice. I am writing this letter on behalf of myself and my reporting partner, Melissa Lewis, who leads the newsroom's data team.

Thank you for listening to our concerns and testimony today. We regret not being able to attend the meeting in person, but we submit this written testimony to detail ways in which personally identifiable information has been critical to our work doing public service journalism here in Oregon.

Earlier this year, Melissa and I analyzed arrest data from the Portland Police Bureau and found that half of the arrests made by police involved someone listed in police records as homeless. This finding was notable because Portlanders experiencing homelessness account for less than 3 percent of the city's overall population.

As many of you know, homelessness is one of the most pressing issues in Oregon. Our work so far has prompted the mayor in Portland to acknowledge the arrest rate is a problem. It has also prompted the city's Independent Police Review to investigate the interactions police have with people who are homeless.

We analyzed just under 20,000 arrest records from 2017 alone. None of this work would have been possible without access to personally identifiable information. Because of the way police keep their data, we needed to use full names and dates of birth to not only count individual people who had been arrested but also to simply count actual arrests without duplicating them.

The full dates of birth and address fields were also imperative to spot check hundreds of entries in our data with other datasets, such as court records. And, of course, the information about an arrested person's address formed the foundation of this particular analysis. But we also used information about race that was included in the data to identify disparities in racial demographics -- in addition to housing status -- among police enforcement.

This work is just one example of the many ways we journalists use personally identifiable information for reporting that is in the public's interest.

Access to personally identifiable information is vital for us to conduct in-depth data analyses that identify patterns, hold government agencies accountable and foster conversations in our



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community about public policy. Preventing journalists from accessing this information would leave such analyses within the hands of government alone. With no checks and no balances.

We strongly encourage the committee to see the value in this journalism and in our continued access to the information that makes it possible.

Thank you very much,

Rebecca Woolington and Melissa Lewis
The Oregonian/OregonLive