Make commitment to social justice for all citizens

By Corey Pegues, May 29, 2021

Most people don't know slave patrols were one of the early forms of American policing. White Southerners lived in constant fear of slave rebellions that would upset the status quo. Two hundred years later, modern policing reflects the brutality and racism of its vigilante origins.

The purpose of today's law enforcement is to respond to disorder. But what constitutes "order" is at the discretion of the person wearing the badge, not our laws. In other words, police officers in America are able to do what they please, often unchecked and unchallenged.

Most say the system is broken. I say it's functioning the way it was designed.

Earlier this year, the pepper-spraying of a 9-year-old girl by the Rochester Police Department shocked the nation for its unnecessary cruelty. As officers responded to a family distress call, they chose not to utilize their "persons in crisis" training, per Mayor Lovely Warren. Instead, in order to subdue a harmless child, they used the same methods that protesters of police brutality have been subjected to for years.

Not long after, the same department pepper-sprayed a Black mother with her 3-year-old daughter in her presence. Such violence comes just before Rochester was named in a civil suit by Daniel Prude's family for his murder.

There are only so many times history can repeat itself before internal investigations and administrative leave don't cut it.

These regrettable incidents are symptomatic of a larger problem with law enforcement, whose members seemingly feel emboldened to commit depraved acts in the name of keeping the peace - over and over again.

Elected officials in Albany are seeking to address the crimes of our protectors. They are currently considering Senate Bill 4002, a ban on the use of chemical agents by law enforcement, and Assembly Bill 1471, which prohibits the superfluous use of deadly force by police officers.

Even though this legislation is better late than never, it reminds us that never late is better.

Too often, reforms surrounding policing are passed after it's too late. Amid a national reckoning with police brutality in the summer of 2020, municipalities across the country committed to regulatory checks on police power, ranging from citizen review boards to mental health crisis training. These resolutions will help improve the state of policing for decades to come, and some departments have already seen marked improvement in their relations with the general public. But the best time to pass such laws was before officers felt it necessary to use chokeholds and tear gas against Black and brown Americans.

Until these proposals see the light of day, we're left with a system that intentionally deals with police brutality after it's occurred. Law enforcement has strong-armed elected officials into granting them unreasonable legal protection in the face of horrific violence. This lag is not coincidental, nor is it new.

That doesn't mean we should turn our backs on marginalized communities when they experience injustice. Targeted reforms can help rectify these issues. Law enforcement officials should make the communities they work in their homes. Training academies should teach young police officers how to deal with mental health issues. Body cameras should be mandatory and always recording.

Most importantly, citizen accountability infrastructure, such as that proposed in Assembly Bill 820, can ensure these proposals stick to the wall.

Daniel Prude is just one of the nameless thousands of victims of police brutality. While all these deaths have fundamentally shaken our neighborhoods' trust in law enforcement, there is a future in which we can work together. To do so, we must commit to social justice and work in the best interest of all.

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