CFLJ Press Statement
June 11, 2020

Healing Our Community: Ending Systemic Racism in Albany

1. Two months before George Floyd’s murder on May 25th, the Center for Law and Justice launched a plan for a community/police collaboration to address systemic racism and public safety in Albany, culminating in a community/government symposium in the fall.

2. The Center launched this collaboration because we realized that systemic racism threatened to unravel all the progress Albany has made in community policing during the last decade. CFLJ tried to bring this to the attention of government officials with our 2019 “Community Survey” indicating that Blacks overwhelmingly believe that neither the Albany Police Department nor the District Attorney’s office respect them and treat them fairly. We tried again in 2020, issuing a report titled “Structural Racism and Public Safety in Albany.” Sadly, the government officials’ response could best be characterized as, “Yes, there may be systemic racism here, but Albany is no worse than any other city in America.” That may be true, but it doesn’t make it right - nor does it absolve government officials from their responsibility to address systemic racism in Albany.

3. Concerned about official apathy, the Center invited four key government officials - the Mayor, Police Chief, Common Council President, and District Attorney - to work with us in a collaborative manner to prepare for a “Recommitment to Community Policing” symposium. Since the beginning of April, the Center has been sending the four officials questions related to systemic racism and community policing.

4. The Center is very pleased that all but one of the officials – District Attorney David Soares - have accepted our invitation. The questions posed to these officials and their responses to date are posted on the Center’s website, www.cflj.org. The Center is absolutely perplexed that District Attorney Soares has not seen fit to even acknowledge our four requests for his participation, much less answer any of our questions. The questions posted on the Center’s website demonstrate the critical role of the District Attorney in addressing systemic racism in Albany.
5. It is encouraging that within the past week, Governor Cuomo, the State Legislature, Mayor Sheehan, Chief Hawkins, Common Council President Ellis, and District Attorney Soares have each announced reforms designed to address systemic racism. We heartily applaud these efforts, but the complexity of the issue calls for an ongoing community/government collaboration.

6. George Floyd’s murder and the ensuing national outcry have revealed not only the breadth and depth of systemic racism in the criminal justice system, but the refusal of communities all across the country to tolerate it any longer. Today, the Center very enthusiastically announces that the New York State Writers Institute, through Executive Director Paul Grondahl, has offered to partner with the Center in designing the fall symposium. This partnership will allow the Center to expand the scope of the symposium beyond a recommitment to community policing. We have given the fall symposium a new name, “Healing Our Community: Ending Systemic Racism in Albany.”

7. We do not expect the fall symposium to be the end of Albany’s efforts to address systemic racism and public safety but, rather, a beginning. We hope to come away from the symposium with the foundation of a plan designed to maintain the commitment, accountability, transparency, and advocacy necessary to sustain true community policing in Albany.

8. In closing, the Center is most immediately concerned with the lack of transparency exhibited by District Attorney Soares and Police Chief Hawkins. The District Attorney has completely ignored the Center’s most recent questions, demonstrating a blatant lack of transparency. Transparency is important because without transparency, there can be no accountability. Accountability is important because even the most seemingly race-neutral policies can be implemented in a manner that unintentionally adversely impacts minorities. District Attorney Soares can demonstrate his commitment to transparency by immediately releasing the demographic composition of the DA’s Office, which he has thus far refused to do.

We call upon Chief Hawkins to demonstrate his commitment to transparency by releasing the Albany Police Department Office of Professional Standards investigative report regarding what is often referred to as “The First Street Incident.” Despite having committed to releasing the investigative report by February 16, 2020, the Chief has repeatedly employed delay tactics to keep this information out of the public’s view.

An August 2019 Times Union article indicated that the internal report from the Office of Professional Standards would be in the Chief’s hands by the first week in September 2019. In January 2020, the Center asked the Chief when the report would be released, and the Chief committed to releasing it by February 16, 2020. The report was not released at that time, and the APD gave no indication that a FOIL request was required for its release.
Again in April the Center asked the Chief: “When will the APD release its report regarding the “First Street Incident” investigation, promised for release February 16, 2020?”

Chief Hawkins responded that “the Albany Police Department will immediately assess the release of the investigative documents associated with the “First Street Incident” upon the receipt of a Freedom of Information Law request.”

The APD acknowledged receipt of the Center’s FOIL request for the report on May 12, 2020. On June 10, 2020 (one day past the twenty-business-day deadline required for a response), the Albany City Clerk’s Office responded, “Due to the current pandemic the department working on collecting the information required to comply with your FOIL request has requested a 20 business days extension. The anticipated completion date of your FOIL request will be July 8th, 2020.”

We simply do not understand the delay. According to the Chief’s own words in August 2019 and January 2020, the report already exists --- why does the APD need more time to collect “the information required to comply with your FOIL request?”

Transparency is the first big step in a long journey toward accountability. The Center asks that District Attorney Soares and Chief Hawkins demonstrate respect for the community by releasing the requested information.