Chief Hawkins’ Responses to Questions Posed in CFLJ’s June 19, 2020 Letter

Here are Chief Hawkins’ unedited responses to the Center’s June 19, 2020 letter:

1. “Systemic racism” is a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt over time. Systemic racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic, and political systems in which we all exist.

Do you agree that the definition of “systemic racism” above is an appropriate basis for our work? Would you like to suggest any modifications?

Yes. No.

2. In previous exchanges (prior to George Floyd’s murder) regarding how systemic racism affects the operations of the Albany Police Department, you responded that the APD’s systems are as progressive as any in the country, and that its practices are aligned with nationally recognized best practices. You agreed with the Center that even though this may be true, structural racism may still affect the operations of the APD.

It is clear from protests and uprisings across the country, including here in Albany after George Floyd’s murder, that “nationally recognized best practices” are not working to protect black and brown lives in America – in Albany. What specific actions will you be taking inside the department to combat systemic racism?

Systemic Racism, in the definition adopted by the Center, involves policies, practices, cultural representations, and other norms that perpetuate racial group inequity. Here is what I have done to ensure that the Albany Police Department does not perpetuate racial group inequities:

- I restructured the police department to, in part, allow for more opportunities for black officers to gain exposures to critical professional development opportunities. For example, once the department is fully staffed, officers will be rotated on a regular basis into temporary assignments in specialized units, such as the Detective Office, Traffic, Forensics, etc. This process will be formalized and available to all officers on a rotating basis. This will allow black officers to develop and strengthen professional skills that will be beneficial during the selection of permanent personnel for those positions.
- I assigned a black male officer to the Office of Professional Standards. Among other things, this increased the racial diversity in that area, sent strong signals to other black officers that opportunities exist for professional development, and promoted cultural
change in an area responsible for internal and external investigations of department personnel.

- I promoted a black female civilian employee to a supervisory position within the Crime Analysis Center. That placed a black female in a position to have influence with respect to the policies, practices, and culture in that area.

- I created a police internship program (Police Cadet) designed to provide an additional pathway for black men and women from the City Of Albany to become Albany police officers. This grant funded program will specifically target low to moderate income Albany residents. This program creates exciting opportunities to increase the racial and cultural diversity within the Albany Police Department.

- I met with a group of minority police officers to hear their frustrations and concerns about the culture within the police department. Additionally, I have met several times informally with individual minority members to discuss the same issues. I always share those concerns with upper command. In addition, those concerns are always considered during command meetings involving policies, practices, or departmental direction. Again, this promotes positive cultural change.

- I have specifically promoted people to upper command positions who share my commitment of diversity, inclusion, and equity. I monitor their performance and hold them accountable.

- I organized a department-wide meeting to discuss racial issues. Sworn and non-sworn employees from all ranks attended. Open and honest dialogue occurred. An on-going conversation was started that will lead to cultural changes.

- I created a Diversity and Inclusion Committee that will be comprised of sworn and non-sworn employees. The group will be diverse with respect to race, culture, gender, sexual orientation and identity, professional and personal experiences, and social and political perspectives, among other things. The group will meet on a frequent basis and will create the Albany Police Department’s first ever Diversity Statement. The purpose of the group is to ensure that diversity drives excellence within the department, and to ensure that the department’s environment is diverse and inclusive. The members of this committee will facilitate efforts to ensure that the department embraces the strengths of our differences.

- I am in the process of creating full-ride college scholarships (books, tuition, and supplies) for Albany residents from underserved and underrepresented neighborhoods to attend a local private college (cannot yet identify the college that will sponsor the scholarship). Two scholarship recipients will be chosen each year and they can choose to study from any of the academic disciplines offered by the college. The college will cover all costs for the scholarship recipients until they complete their degree requirements. The first recipients will start in the fall of 2020. This program may not directly address the perpetuation of racial group inequities within the department. But it will send strong signals to police personnel that the police chief values supporting the needs of underserved and underrepresented residents – many of whom are minorities. This is a small thing that changes the culture of the organization.
These are just a few things that I do as the leader of this organization to ensure that the department does not perpetuate racial group inequities. It is important to note that the “nationally recognized best practices” that have been minimized by the Center were actually put in place prior to my appointment as police chief. Whatever systemic racism exists in this organization was not created, condoned, nor promoted by me. The Center has accused me of being “at best, misleading” on some issues. I assert that the Center’s implication that I am responsible for decades of systemic racism within the Albany Police Department and/or have condoned or promoted it is more than simply misleading. The implication is patently false. During my 1 ½ years as chief, I have taken many formal (as partially documented above) and informal steps to ensure that that this department does not perpetuate racial group inequities.

3. Will you now commit to a “date certain” by which the requested report (i.e., the “First Street Incident” report) will be provided?

A Freedom of Information Law request has been received and is being assessed by the Office of Professional Standards and Corporation Counsel.

4. Due to the lack of commitment to transparency exhibited by police departments, and the proliferation of protests and uprisings following George Floyd’s murder, New York State government has swiftly done away with Civil Rights Law 50-a. And, Governor Cuomo has mandated that transparency be included as an element of each municipality’s Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative plan. Chief Hawkins, what specific steps do you see as necessary in overhauling the APD’s transparency practices?

Perceptions of lack of transparency regarding APD’s practices will be openly discussed during the state-mandated police reform process that will take place with stakeholders from the community. The appropriate adjustments will be made afterwards.

5. According to the NYU School of Law Policing Project in 2019,

“One of ACPAC’s most important functions is its role in developing APD policy and initiatives that reflect the concerns of the community. Recently, ACPAC helped craft policies for new APD technology—first for body-worn cameras, and currently for drones. These policies are finalized through an iterative process in which the APD creates a draft policy, and ACPAC hosts public meetings to facilitate community discussion on how the proposed policy can better address community concerns. The APD then incorporates that feedback into the policy.”

Chief Hawkins, was the most recent version of the APD “Use of Force – Lethal Weapons, General Order No: 1.3.05” policy that you forwarded to the Center reviewed by ACPAC prior to its re-issue date of August 2, 2019?
No. But to be clear, this is not a new policy. Moreover, the release of this policy was consistent with the process that was in place prior to my administration.

6. Was the most recent version of the APD “Use of Force – Less Lethal Weapons, General Order No: 1.3.00” policy that you forwarded to the Center reviewed by ACPAC prior to its re-issue date of August 5, 2019?

   No. But to be clear, this is not a new policy. Moreover, the release of this policy was consistent with the process that was in place prior to my administration.

7. Chief Hawkins, given the Governor’s mandate that municipal public safety plans must address transparency, will you commit to requiring that all new APD policies and APD policy revisions be reviewed by ACPAC prior to their issue or re-issue date?

   I will discuss this with the leadership of ACPAC.

8. Will you commit to including racial impact statements on all new or revised departmental policies?

   I am not fundamentally opposed to statements that assess the impact of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, sexual orientation, sexual identity, socio-economic status, etc. in department policies. However, I do not have the staffing or other resources to conduct such assessments at this time.

9. What are your plans for seeking a Civil Rights History curriculum for department-wide training?

   A History of Racism seminar has been added to the police academy and in-service department-wide trainings. Materials regarding Civil Rights are imbedded in the seminar.