Albany is well on the way toward reinventing its public safety system, but there is still much work to be done. The Center has conducted a months-long dialogue with Mayor Kathy Sheehan, Police Chief Eric Hawkins, and Common Council President Corey Ellis in preparation for their panel discussion with the Center at the October symposium. Next, we turn our attention to the all-important voices of the community.

Recapping what has been accomplished to date, the Center first launched this community/government dialogue in early April, driven primarily by the experiences of our citizens here in Albany. On May 25, midway through our government officials questioning process, George Floyd died after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. The ensuing public outcry and calls for reform in cities and towns all across the nation, including Albany, amplified the importance of our dialogue.

Swift action was taken in New York by city and state officials. Mayor Kathy Sheehan decreed that the APD cannot use choke holds, “knee-to-neck” restraints, or “hog-tying;” that an officer must intervene if he or she sees another officer using excessive force or verbally escalating a situation; and that the history of racism and implicit bias be taught to police officers. The Albany Common Council supported repealing Civil Rights Law 50-a, granting subpoena power to the Community Police Review Board, and requiring all APD officers to wear body cameras. State government repealed Civil Rights Law 50-a, outlawed choke holds, and required that the State Attorney General serve as a special prosecutor in cases involving law enforcement officers. Governor Cuomo announced the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative, requiring localities to develop a plan that reinvents and modernizes police strategies and programs.

Against that backdrop, the Center is now working in partnership with the New York State Writers Institute to design an expanded October symposium, “The Time for Reckoning: Confronting Systemic Racism, Seeking Justice and Reimagining Society.” Due to the uncertainty of the Covid-19 situation, we are planning a virtual symposium. The panel discussion with the government officials and the Center’s Executive Director, Dr. Alice Green, will be moderated by a local print or broadcast media journalist and aired on WMHT. But this is just one component of our work. Since George Floyd’s murder, the goal of the symposium has broadened to imagine a just society free of systemic racism, where BIPOC individuals in the Capital Region truly have no reason to fear that they or a loved one will lose their lives at the hands of police. To provide context for our reinvented public safety plan, the Center and the New York State Writers Institute will host a variety of perspectives on a website we expect to launch later this month.

The symposium’s website will provide a multi-media, interactive and collaborative forum for the voices of community members impacted by systemic racism. Additionally, there will be videos of such nationally-known experts on systemic racism as Robin DiAngelo, author of White Fragility, sharing insights with Dr. Green and veteran Times Union journalist Paul Grondahl. The website will also offer a treasure trove of resources for those who wish to learn more about systemic racism, its impact nationally and locally, and measures we can take to combat it. Most importantly, Albany residents’ contributions to the website will help frame a “Community Voices” panel for the October symposium. We can’t wait to hear from you!