CFLJ COMMENTARY

Reinventing Public Safety in Albany

It’s time to roll up our sleeves, Albany --- we’ve got work to do! By April 1, 2021, the Common Council must enact a brand, spanking-new policing strategy for our city. We, the community, are to be among the plan’s chief architects. Governor Cuomo’s Executive Order #203, the “New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative,” charges us with the awesome responsibility of completely renovating policing in Albany. We’re not talking about some minor tweaks to a few policies here and there, or a simple reshuffling of police department components; we must “reinvent” policing in Albany. There’s a lot of ground to cover, and there are some challenges facing us, but the people of Albany are up to the task.

The Governor’s mandate requires that the new plan:

- be based on a comprehensive review of current police force deployments, strategies, policies, procedures, and practices;
- improve such deployments, strategies, policies, procedures, and practices;
- address the particular needs of the communities served by the police agency;
- promote community engagement to foster trust, fairness, and legitimacy; and
- address any racial bias and disproportionate policing of communities of color.

The Executive Order stipulates that the Mayor shall convene the head of the police department and stakeholders in the community to develop a plan which must consider but is not limited to:

- evidence-based policing strategies;
- use of force policies;
- procedural justice;
- any studies addressing systemic racial bias or racial justice in policing;
- implicit bias awareness training;
- de-escalation training and practices;
- law enforcement assisted diversion programs;
- restorative justice practices;
- community-based outreach and conflict resolution;
- problem-oriented policing;
- hot spots policing;
- focused deterrence;
- crime prevention through environmental design;
- violence prevention and reduction interventions;
- model policies and guidelines promulgated by the New York State Municipal Police Training Council; and
- standards promulgated by the New York State Law Enforcement Accreditation Program.

Yes, Albany, this is a tall order. To put an end to the brutal and unjust treatment suffered by countless George Floyds throughout America’s history, we must construct a plan that ends four
centuries of systemic racism in a matter of mere months. But extreme circumstances call for extreme measures. And as we start our journey towards justice, there are a few obstacles to overcome. Some government officials do not appear particularly interested in carrying out the Governor’s mandate. Some police union officials, both local and nationwide, continue using rhetoric that characterizes calls for reform as accusations of personal, intentional acts of discrimination. Another challenging hurdle is the need for some soul-searching introspection. Everyone who has never had to worry about police abuse based on the color of their skin must acknowledge their tacit complicity in the persistence of systemic racism in our justice system. A new plan cannot effectively change policing practices unless we are committed to change from within.

“You may have heard the talk of diversity, sensitivity training, and body cameras. These are all fine and applicable, but they understake the task and allow the citizens of this country to pretend that there is real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them. The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country’s criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority.”
— Ta-Nehisi Coates

Once everyone has acknowledged this undeniable truth, we can start to put together a plan that reinvents public safety in Albany. Fortunately, we have the inspiration of Governor Andrew Cuomo, who unabashedly proclaims New York to be the most progressive state in the country and challenges all New Yorkers to produce model policing plans. We have the leadership of Mayor Kathy Sheehan, whose words and actions have demonstrated her sincere commitment to meaningful change in Albany’s justice system. And most importantly of all --- we have the passion of the people of Albany. Since George Floyd’s murder, teeming multi-racial and intergenerational demonstrations in our city have reminded us that we are all our brothers’ (and sisters’) keepers, and we are all responsible for change.

Yes, reinventing policing in our city is an enormous undertaking. But we are the capital city of New York Tough, Smart, United, Disciplined, and Loving. We got this, Albany!