

Opening Statement for Marq Lewis of We The People Oklahoma

Thank you, Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney and distinguished committee members. I am grateful for the invitation and the opportunity to speak with you today and share our community's concerns regarding abusive policing practices and the immense need for reform.

My name is Marq Lewis and I am a community organizer and founder of the organization We The People Oklahoma. Our organization has been instrumental in getting necessary changes made in our local police department including empaneling a grand jury to remove the former Tulsa County Sheriff. Those indictments lead to convictions and removal of officers who were negatively impacting the community.

Today I would like to discuss policy changes, decertification, and racial disparities.

In 2016 an officer involved shooting which ended the life of Terrence Crutcher showed just how slanted the policies are to protect officers from facing criminal indictments. The officer in question was not given a drug or alcohol test after the shooting. The officer was allowed to review video of the shooting prior to making a statement and the officer was not interviewed for 3 days immediately after the shooting. Nor did the officer render aid to Mr. Crutcher even though she was trained and registered as an emergency medical technician. We do know the suspect or victim's history and possible impairment yet have little to no information on the impaired judgement of the officer involved. This is common across officer related shootings. I submit that each officer who discharges their firearm should have mandatory and immediate blood and alcohol testing along with a psychological evaluation. This will help the departments to avoid putting broken officers back in the field.

There must be a specific federal definition of excessive force. It should not be left up to a jury to determine what a reasonable law enforcement officer should do in various circumstances. We also must have a federal standard that red flags an officer for use of force and excessive forces complaints. Officer Chauvin, who is now charged with the murder of George Floyd, had dozens of complaints in his 19 year career and 16 of which were closed without disciplinary action. Would a federal limit on excessive force claims have prevented Chauvin from committing the crime he is now accused of?

We need to encourage agencies to begin to decertify law enforcement officers including security guards who are fired or commit crimes. We have seen time and time again an officer commits an offense or is fired from a department and that officer moves to another department without a review for decertification. Officer Shannon Kepler who was convicted of killing an unarmed African American man Jeremy Lake has not been decertified. Bob Bates who was convicted of killing an unarmed African American man Eric Harris has not be decertified. Most recently in Tulsa a former detention officer who had a history of racial bias and use of force claims was able to become a security guard and shoot and kill an unarmed black man. Had any of these officers been decertified it is possible they would not have been able to inflict the death and trauma they caused. Governor Charles Baker of Massachusetts has proposed a bill that would decertify officers who failed to live up to their oath by falsifying evidence, make false arrests or are convicted of crimes. This should be a national standard.

Currently the process of decertification is up to the licensing board of each state. Therefore, a federal database of negligent and destructive law enforcement officers needs to be created to weed out those who should be decertified.

Obviously racial disparities play a part in abusive policing practices and training. In Oklahoma officers are required to have 70 hours of firearms training and 69 hours of Custody and Physical Control training, yet they only are required to have 9 hours of community relations training and 4 hours of mental health training. According to the Tulsa World African Americans are arrested twice as much as any other group while only making up 15% of the population. They also were overrepresented and had longer stays in custody for lower level charges. In the nation the largest racial disparities in jail admissions were for the lowest level charges: municipal offenses. Black women were admitted to the jail on municipal charges at 3.5 times the rate of white women and black men at 3.8 times the rate of white men per the Vera Institute. From over policing in black neighborhoods, gang task force units that target minority areas and the recruitment of young teens with minor infractions into being confidential informants, racial disparities and biases are used daily to intimidate and traumatize people of color.

In conclusion in order to reduce the abuses in law enforcement we must route out racial biases, increase community-based training, decertify officers for excessive force and other negative behaviors and create a federal standard that is routed in justice. Our people have suffered at the hands of rouge police. Now is the time to bring about these changes so that our children can grow up in an America where they do not have to fear the one who took an oath to serve and protect. A mother should never hear the words coming from her children: "Am I Next?". The power we all have is a voice and with that voice we must never be silent until we are all Free.

Thank you