

NEW YORK STATE
POLICE REFORM
AND REINVENTION
COLLABORATIVE

**INITIAL REPORT ON INNOVATIVE
COMMUNITY INITIATIVES**

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New York State
Police Reform and
Reinvention Collaborative

Initial Report on Innovative Community Initiatives

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Last summer, individuals took to the streets of their communities throughout the United States to protest the killings of people of color by police officers. While these protests occurred in the immediate aftermath of the deaths of Breonna Taylor in Louisville and George Floyd in Minneapolis, they reflected years of outrage in communities of color about excessive force, over-policing and the deaths of Black men at the hands of police, including Eric Garner here in New York, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Walter Scott in Charleston, Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Philando Castile in St. Paul and Stephon Clark in Sacramento.

On June 12, 2020, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo took swift action to address systemic and racial inequities by signing the landmark “Say Their Name” Reform Agenda, which provides for transparency of prior disciplinary records of law enforcement officers by repealing Section 50-a of the Civil Rights Law; bans chokeholds by law enforcement officers; prohibits false, race-based 9-1-1 reports; and designates the Attorney General as an independent prosecutor for matters relating to civilian deaths involving police.

That same day, to build on those reforms, Governor Cuomo issued Executive Order 203, requiring all local governments in New York State that operate a police department to “perform a comprehensive review of current police force deployments, strategies, policies, procedures, and practices, and develop a plan to improve such deployments, strategies, policies, procedures, and practices, for the purposes of addressing the particular needs of the communities served by such police agency and promote community engagement to foster trust, fairness, and legitimacy, and to address any racial bias and disproportionate policing of communities of color.”

This is the first and only statewide, community-driven police reform program in the country. At least 15 states have created task forces to make recommendations to elected officials, but no other state has brought every community to the table to take a comprehensive look at policing and craft locally tailored solutions. Executive Order 203 specifically required every covered jurisdiction to develop its police reform plan through an open, transparent, and inclusive process, including release of at least one draft of the plan for public comment prior to adoption. Executive Order 203 further mandated that each plan be ratified or adopted by the local legislative body, signed by the jurisdiction's chief executive and submitted to the State by April 1, 2021. Subsequent legislation provided that failure to submit a plan meeting the specifications of the Executive Order would result in a suspension of certain state funding to the locality and potential appointment by the Attorney General of a monitor to oversee the jurisdiction's police department.

The Executive Order directed local governments to conduct an intensive and inclusive process of public engagement including releasing draft plans for public comment before finalization. All plans then were required to be adopted or ratified by the local legislative body and signed by the locality's chief executive. Localities failing to submit a plan to the New York State Division of the Budget by April 1, 2021, face withholding of appropriated State and federal funding and possible imposition of a monitor.

To help frame the discussion and guide localities embarking upon this important work, the State published a Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Resource Guide for public officials and citizens. The 139-page Resource Guide outlined critical questions,

reference materials and information to provide Collaborative participants with access to a range of ideas and research that allowed them to delve deeper into the issues facing their community. Governor Cuomo, in a letter that accompanied the Resource Guide, explained his vision for the collaborative:

Many communities all across the country are dealing with issues concerning their police departments. The millions of people who gathered in protest, even in the midst of a public health crisis, made that clear. The situation is unsustainable for all.

Maintaining public safety is imperative; it is one of the essential roles of government. In order to achieve that goal, there must be mutual trust and respect between police and the communities they serve. The success and safety of our society depends on restoring and strengthening mutual trust. With crime growing in many cities, we must seize this moment of crisis and turn it into an opportunity for transformation.

While the conflict is real and the issues are complicated, we know in New York that denial or avoidance is not a successful strategy.... [I]n our large and diverse state, there is no “one size fits all” solution. To rebuild the police-community relationship, each local government must convene stakeholders for a fact-based and honest dialogue about the public safety needs of their community. Each community must envision for itself the appropriate role of the police. Policies must be developed to allow the police to do their jobs to protect the public and these policies must meet with the local communities’ acceptance.

“Collaborative” is the key word. It would be a mistake to frame these discussions as an adversarial process or an effort to impose top-down solutions. Issues must be aired but solutions must be crafted.... Change is hard. But change is necessary if we are to grow. The tension must be resolved. Order and public safety must be ensured. I am excited by the possibilities and I am hopeful that this time of crisis will evolve into a moment of creativity and progress. It is normal to make adjustments to fit changing values and circumstances. We are addressing the COVID crisis by acknowledging the problem, having productive dialogue and by working together. Let’s do the same here. This is an opportunity to reinvent law enforcement for the 21st century.

Massive Public Engagement

The Collaborative succeeded throughout the State in bringing together stakeholders with diverse points of view and prompting candid and productive conversations. Most jurisdictions held public meetings over Zoom, allowing all community members to participate. Many jurisdictions conducted surveys that engaged a large proportion of their community:

- Rochester got over 3,200 responses to its survey
- Mount Vernon got 870 responses
- Riverhead – 1200
- East Hampton 1096
- Tarrytown – 1013
- Elmira – 928
- Southampton – 873
- Mount Vernon – 870
- Batavia – 840
- Eastchester – 800
- West Seneca – 767
- Livingston – 555
- Webster – 538
- Mamaroneck – 512
- Amherst – 450
- Chautauqua County – 427
- Cheektowaga – 411
- Fulton – 366
- Gates Town – 207
- Dunkirk – 116

Many jurisdictions took extra care to bring into the conversation segments of the community that are often underrepresented in civic discourse. For example:

- **Utica** created the College/Community Partnership for Racial Justice Reform, a coalition of the 6 local schools to and community centers to engage young

people including a survey, engagement through text messages, and a lecture and Q&A series.

- **Steuben**, in addition to surveying the public, also surveyed police officers and arrested persons to inquire about their experience and the professionalism of the officers.
- **Kingston** invited the entire community to serve on the Re-Envision Public Safety Task Force alongside local officials. Approximately 40 citizens responded. A lead coordinator appointed by The Mayor reviewed all the applications and interviewed the candidates eligible to serve.

The State identified 492 local governments subject to Executive Order 203. As of May 24, 2021, 482 of those jurisdictions have submitted Collaborative plans. At Governor Cuomo's direction, the Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) reviewed these plans with the goal of identifying creative and promising initiatives developed by localities through this collaborative process. This report highlights notable examples to help inspire other communities as they implement and refine their plans. The initiatives are presented in five categories:

- 1) Improving how non-violent incidents are handled;
- 2) Enhancing policing standards and strategies;
- 3) Fostering community-oriented leadership, culture, and accountability;
- 4) Recruiting and supporting quality personnel; and
- 5) Developing strategies for successful plan implementation.

Improving How Non-Violent Incidents Are Handled

As the Resource Guide noted, many advocates for policing reform contend “that the police should not be involved in responding to non-criminal conduct” and propose “curtailing police activities that pose a risk of overreaction to minor offenses.” Recognizing these concerns, many localities used the Reform and Reinvention Collaborative process to rethink who should respond to non-violent incidents. Some jurisdictions have elected to deploy mental health and social work professionals when appropriate, while others have implemented models that pair these professionals with police when they respond to certain calls for service.

- **Rockville Centre** plans to establish a screening process for calls as they are received by dispatchers to determine if a Mobile Crisis Outreach Team is better equipped to handle the call without a police response. If a police response is required, dispatch will send two officers, an ambulance and a patrol supervisor to the call. The supervisor on scene will contact the Mobile Crisis Outreach Team, advise of the on-scene situation and request guidance and assistance with the call.
- **Utica** is creating a new Crisis Intervention Team in partnership with a local nonprofit organization. Teams of specially trained police officers and service providers will be responsible for responding to calls involving individuals in crisis or those dealing with addiction, homelessness, and other social or mental health issues.

- The **Cities of Rensselaer and Troy**, the **Towns of East Greenbush, North Greenbush, Schodack**, and the **Village of Nassau**, are developing a new Law Enforcement-Mental Health Referral System to streamline and improve how these cases are handled. Planning and implementation are expected to be completed by July 2021.
- The **City of Ithaca** has created a task force to fully redesign its police department into a new civilian-run Department of Public Safety. The Department will have a unit of unarmed first responders that will handle certain non-violent calls as well as a unit of traditional police officers.
- The **City of Rochester** reduced its police department budget by \$1.4 million and allocated half of that to its Department of Recreation and Human Services for anti-violence programming.

Enhancing Policing Standards and Strategies

A primary goal of the Reform and Reinvention Collaborative was to promote the sharing and implementation of effective standards and strategies to enhance overall police services across the state. The Resource Guide stated:

Effective policing requires standards and strategies that advance the goals of protecting the community, engaging with the citizenry in a meaningful and multi-faceted way and demonstrating respect for individuals during law enforcement interactions. Policing is a partnership with the community, requiring a foundation of positive, trust-based relationships with all segments of the population. It is critical that the strategies employed and the manner by which law enforcement interacts with the population are in line with the community's expectations for its police force.

The implementation and review of evidence- and research-based criminal justice standards and strategies is key to improving policing services and modernizing police forces. As part of their Collaborative process, more than 90 percent of jurisdictions evaluated their standards and strategies and nearly 80 percent reviewed model policies issued by the state Municipal Police Training Council (MPTC) and accreditation standards set by the state Law Enforcement Agency Accreditation Council (LEAAC). The Division of Criminal Justice Services provides staff and programmatic support to both councils. Notable policy changes and commitments include:

- The **Rensselaer City Police Department** will engage in an ongoing evaluation of policies related to use of force, including consulting with external subject-matter experts. The agency specifically notes it is using the State's Accreditation Program standards and MPTC model policies as guideposts in the development of their policies. The agency is committed to annual training in defensive tactics and less-lethal device options and all agency uses of force undergo a multi-step review process. The results of these reviews will inform policy, training, and agency culture initiatives, as well as serve as an early-warning system for potential problem officers.
- The **Dutchess County Sheriff's Office** conducted a review of its use of force policy and will update it to require an uninvolved supervisor to conduct a preliminary investigation of all reported uses of force.

Community policing, a strategy that emphasizes developing relationships with residents, was a common area of focus. The Resource Guide stated:

The premise of community policing is that community participation and assistance are crucial for maintaining public safety and building a police force responsive to the public.

The following example illustrates how one municipality is partnering its police and residents to develop public safety strategies:

- The **City of Fulton Police Department** created a Community Partnership Program to improve community-police relationships. Under this program, the police have assigned team leaders to six different wards of the City, where they will work with each ward's elected councilor to build and maintain relationships with residents and business owners. They will work collaboratively to assist residents, solve community problems, and connect people to services. Team leaders will make their contact information readily accessible to residents of their ward so they may easily contact local officers. The City also is establishing a safe exchange zone – a location with officers present that allows strangers to meet and finalize purchases they made online, and parents to exchange custody of their children. Also as a result of the work of the Collaborative, the City has committed that its police department will obtain accreditation and train all its officers in de-escalation, implicit bias, domestic violence, and cultural awareness, by April 2022.

Several jurisdictions used the Collaborative process to develop creative ideas and initiatives for improved policing that are specific to the unique circumstances of their community and reflect its defining characteristics and diversity of its citizenry.

- The **Village of Sodus** created a new requirement for officers to spend approximately four hours a week performing community-building activities or training that will assist officers with community relations, fairness, and impartiality. Community-building activities include, but are not limited to, attending community meetings, participating in goodwill events, and simply talking with residents while on duty.
- The **Syracuse Police Department** has taken multiple steps to strengthen police-community relations, especially with youth and its large, non-English speaking and refugee populations. The agency has created a Director of Community Engagement position, the first of its kind for the Department. Among other responsibilities, the Director will be tasked with creating a nationally affiliated Police Athletic League (PAL) program and a Youth Advisory Council to better connect the agency and city's youth and provide them with greater recreational, educational, and leadership development opportunities. Syracuse also purchased an on-demand translation app and will train all officers to use it to improve encounters with and enhance services for non-English speaking residents. The City is creating a new citizen training academy for new Americans in partnership

with the New Americans Forum to build ongoing relationships with the immigrant community and remove barriers to relationships with law enforcement in Syracuse.

Plans also included reforms and creative strategies to better protect children who are present when police are responding to calls for service or taking individuals into custody.

- **Buffalo** is partnering with the Osborne Foundation to create a Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents Program, which will develop policies to minimize trauma to children of parents who are arrested, including by providing sensitive follow-up services to children and families.
- **Suffolk County** is bringing social workers to situations in which police officers are executing a search warrant or making an arrest in a home where children are present.

Fostering Community-Oriented Leadership, Culture, and Accountability

The Reform and Reinvention Collaborative was designed to bring local leaders and the community together to discuss challenging issues and work to forge a better understanding and a shared vision of policing and community safety. Most collaborative processes began by assessing the current status of policing in the community through surveys, review of policing data, and listening sessions.

To sustain this momentum, processes must be created and implemented to keep leaders and residents engaged and focused on continuously building upon this vision.

The Resource Guide stated:

Reforms cannot succeed or be sustained without commitment from strong and effective leadership — in other words — without a supportive institutional culture. Culture determines behavior much more powerfully than policies and rules. The ultimate goal of reform is to ensure an institutional culture consistent with your goals for community-police relations.

Civilian complaints against an officer are often key to identifying and preventing problematic behavior from escalating. Localities zeroed in on creating or strengthening civilian oversight of police agencies as a mechanism for greater accountability and community engagement – more than half the plans discussed civilian oversight and civilian review boards.

- The **Town of New Castle** will create an independent office of the Community Advocate to assist individuals with filing complaints or filing them on an individual's behalf; maintain an individual's anonymity if desired; act as an intermediary with the police for the purpose of conducting a complete and thorough investigation; keep the individual fully informed about the investigation while ongoing; and notify the individual of the outcome of their complaint.
- The **City of Newburgh** strengthened its Newburgh Police-Community Relations Review Board by giving it subpoena power. This will strengthen its independence and ensure that it is able to effectively provide oversight and accountability.

- The **City of Corning** and **Steuben County** plan to establish a countywide citizen review panel to assess and examine practices, training, and officer conduct of adjudicated incidents involving uses of force, police misconduct, vehicle pursuits and other incidents to promote best practices.

Community policing principles are rooted in the idea that deepening contact and collaboration with the community will result in more successful interaction and engagement with residents. Many localities created new bodies to continue the dialogue created while developing their Reform and Reinvention plans.

- The **City of Rye** will create a Community Police Advisory Committee to increase community understanding and trust. The committee will monitor the implementation of the City's police reform and reinvention plan, provide a forum to hear from and educate the public, and create a community publication to educate residents on their rights and responsibilities in the community.
- **Bronxville** will reinstitute a standing committee of village government, police, and student government representatives to help develop trust and strengthen bonds between younger residents and the police department while at the same time, aiming to address underage drinking and substance abuse.
- **New Rochelle** is creating a new Community-Police Partnership Board, bringing together community representatives with police and city government officials to

create the joint oversight body. Community representatives will be selected through an application process, to encourage participation from a broadly diverse group of citizens.

The Resource Guide also laid out the critical nature of transparency to the success of public safety reform:

Transparency is one of the four pillars of procedural justice and is critical to ensuring accountability. Without a full picture of law enforcement policies, procedures, and activity, the public cannot meaningfully evaluate the performance of law enforcement. Even a well-functioning department risks losing public confidence when it does not engage in meaningful transparency.

Many police departments have turned to video technology to provide greater transparency and accountability. In fact, 70 percent of plans included proposals on implementing body-worn cameras or other uses of videorecording technology. Agencies also are embracing transparency by sharing data and making information more accessible to the public:

- **Suffolk County** will establish a website so the public can view a multitude of data dashboards related to policing activity. The Suffolk County Police Department (SCPD) will post numerous documents and reports online, including complaints, use of force, traffic/pedestrian stops, and arrests, among other data and information. The SCPD will establish precinct-level community councils, develop an early warning system, and update the complaint system. Quarterly reports will be provided to the County Legislature.

- The **Schenectady Police Department** is upgrading its data collection by using enhanced technology known as Stop Reporting/SafetyNet Mobile Racial Profiling Data Collection System, which allows its current dispatch software to gather data on the race of individuals that police stop. This information will be analyzed by the agency to gain a greater insight into the nature, characteristics, and demographics of police interactions and identify and address any problematic patterns.

Recruiting and Supporting Quality Personnel

New York State is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse states in the nation. As such, the Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Resource Guide emphasized the importance of proper staffing practices, stressed the importance of officer wellness and its connection to officer safety, and highlighted the need for departments to recruit and maintain officers whose diversity reflects that of the communities they serve.

As noted in the Resource Guide:

Law enforcement agencies should also design and oversee training and wellness programs that aim to ensure the safety of officers and the public while reinforcing relationships of trust between police departments and their communities.

This process has resulted in jurisdictions reforming their officer employment practices in several ways, including changing entrance exams and training practices, including community stakeholders in the hiring process, and investing in officer wellness, among others.

- The **Schenectady Police Department** is piloting a New Hire Advisory Panel, composed of community stakeholders and advocates, to interview potential hires. This will ensure the community has an active role in shaping the force while increasing the legitimacy of officers in the communities that they serve. The department also has asked the city's Affirmative Action Officer to develop a plan for recruiting and hiring a more diverse police force.
- **Syracuse** also is piloting a citizen hiring review panel.
- **Suffolk County** will integrate community engagement criteria in the evaluation process of officers.

Jurisdictions also overhauled their application process and training to improve the caliber of police candidates.

- The **Nassau County Police Department** is adding questions on its employment applications to determine racial or implicit bias; enhancing implicit bias awareness training in recruits; and using in-service training to identify and address any possible unconscious bias throughout the hiring process.
- **Dobbs Ferry** is building procedural justice principles by proposing new evaluation standards in its hiring practices: "Displayed skills in intercultural competency and an interest in positive community engagement; displayed a guardian mindset that

values, protects, and even advocates for the most vulnerable within the communities they serve; and possess resilience and decision-making skills, as well as character traits that are best suited for the community they serve.”

Across the state, jurisdictions are improving and modernizing their training programs.

Notable examples include:

- The **Washington County Sheriff’s Office** worked with outside partners to create a new, two-day training on bias-free policing. They also conducted an analysis of arrests and police contacts to determine if any bias-related indicators are present.
- The **Port Jervis Police Department** now requires all officers to take a new, 40-hour crisis intervention training.

The State’s Resource Guide also emphasized officers’ health and wellness, and jurisdictions plan a variety of ways to track and improve officers’ well-being, starting in the academy and continuing throughout all stages of their careers.

- The **Cities of Syracuse** and **Buffalo** will create brand new officer wellness units and programs.

Developing Strategies for Successful Plan Implementation

Successful implementation of each of the reform plans will require continued focus and commitment by community leaders and stakeholders. Establishing public timelines, milestones, and metrics will keep reforms on track, and allow communities to identify what is working. If reforms are not showing success, localities can revisit and revise them or pivot to identify different strategies that work.

- **Syracuse** launched a dashboard to track the development and implementation of each reform and receive public input. The City also has made its contract with the police officers' union and new policies on surveillance tools publicly available and is currently seeking public comment on its body-worn camera and use of force policies.
- The **Monroe County Sheriff's Office** will develop a Sheriff's Citizen's Interaction Committee to continue communication and feedback between the agency and the community. The committee also will conduct an annual survey of county residents to get regular input on community sentiment on its policing practices.
- The **Village of Cold Spring**, one of the state's smallest municipalities with just about 2,000 residents, is forming a Community Stakeholders Group to provide comment and feedback on the ongoing review of police policies; assess areas of concern identified in community surveys; address the key questions in the Executive Order; and make periodic reports to the Village Board and the public.

Moving Forward

The Resource Guide stated:

Public engagement should not end on April 1, 2021. The Collaborative is an important step in your continual process of building, maintaining and strengthening the relationship between your police department and your community.

New York State has launched policereform.ny.gov to share Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative plans with all New Yorkers, as well as provide additional information about DCJS resources available to help police agencies enhance their operations and effectiveness. This will allow communities to learn from each other, stakeholders in all localities to continue this important dialogue and work, and residents across the state to hold their leaders accountable to their plans.

