

Memo from Chief Halmy and CM to CC, 6/15/20 - Police Reform Efforts Post-George Floyd Incident

City Council,

To aid in discussion of issues pertaining to police management, it may be useful to consider the present status of Peekskill Police initiatives in community policing and accountability as it pertains to use of force and specifically allaying and addressing any concerns from people of color about equal and respectful treatment.

Peekskill Police Department is engaged in a process of critical self-reflection, as all police departments seek to review their practices, training and priorities in the face of a truly extraordinarily social movement triggered by acts of police violence against people of color across the United States. While Peekskill is not a big city and has been blessed with an atmosphere of peaceful protest and sincere desire on all sides to address concerns as they emerge, this is no time to rest on our laurels and stick to “business as usual.” This critical review builds on a history of sustained and successful investment in community policing, and with the full awareness that the work of overcoming systemic racism in the United States is far from complete and that police agencies have a unique responsibility and opportunity to be leaders in this regard. Our goal is to make Peekskill a model for others to emulate.

The NYS Governor has mandated that all local police departments engage in reform efforts over the next year. We are fully committed to this process of critical review, community engagement and taking actions that will enhance police services and community trust. Toward that end, here is a preliminary list of current initiatives and possible new goals under consideration:

Accreditation - periodic re-accreditation by NYS involves a thorough and painstaking review of police records, procedures and results. The PD was last re-accredited on September 9, 2019.

Choke holds and carotid holds are not permitted under PPD policy.

Duty to intervene: Under current PPD policy, officers have a duty to intervene when excessive force is being used and must report this to a supervisor.

Use of Force Documentation: All uses of force are documented, reviewed by Sergeant, Lieutenant and Chief and NYS DCJS is notified.

Body Cameras are utilized during encounters with the public. This includes audits to make sure there is compliance with camera use and police policy.

Mental Health/Crisis Intervention: Police are frequently called to manage people in mental distress and partnerships with other agencies are key to success. PPD uses Phelps Hospital for obtaining mental health treatment for those in crisis

Mental health cards are distributed to those in need of additional mental health resources.
Complaints: Civilian complaint forms are available at Police HQ and on the City's website. If people are uncomfortable addressing their concerns within our complaint process, we encourage them to bring their concern to another police agency for referral to the City, such as the NYS Police or the County District Attorney.

Trainings - Police officers receive a wide range of training, both in the classroom and on the job, to prepare them to serve the public effectively

- Use of force training to limit use of force to only that which is necessary to protect the public and police officers in unsafe situations.

- De-escalation techniques to prevent need for use of force

- Bias/Discrimination/Cultural awareness to understand how implicit bias works and how diverse groups communicate and perceive law enforcement.

- Crisis intervention/mental health training to prepare to safely attend to the needs of people with psychiatric and emotional issues, or disabilities.

Community Engagement and Outreach: The PPD understands that participation in community events, organizations and committees is essential to be able to work proactively to address concerns. A few examples of this community engagement work include:

- PWT - "Park, Walk and Talk" program encourages officers to get out of their cars and socialize with residents

- Mandated Walk-Thrus of Farmers Market, Flea Market and other events to boost police visibility

- Peekskill Housing Authority Board meeting participation.

- Coffee with a Cop events

- NAACP joint ventures, panel discussions, etc.

- Domestic Violence public education and intervention

- Youth Bureau - Officer Saintiche serves on Youth Bureau Board

- National Night Out

- Peekskill/Cortlandt DARE

- School Resource Officer (SRO) program

- Social Media - Police use of Facebook to inform the public

- Youth Academy

- Explorer Program (was starting just as pandemic hit)

- Bike Safety events

New Initiatives Under Consideration or In-Progress:

- Training enhancement, especially as pertains to use of force, de-escalation, implicit bias and cultural sensitivity

- Transparency - Officers identifying themselves clearly at the start of all enforcement related encounters.

- Officer identification cards that can be given out after Police encounters

Recruitment, retention and promotion of high-performing officers, including people of color.

Independent review of Police policies in accordance with all laws and best practice recommendations.

Creation of a survey that can be taken after Police encounters

Complaint process changes - ways for minor complaints to be delivered to Police administration via email address or anonymous tip411 program

Expanded use of GPS in police vehicles for increased accountability

Liaison relationship expansion - Increase in staff time dedicated to liaison relationships with community groups of various types.

Public forums, panels and partnerships - Increased focus on creating and participating in various forums to better understand community issues, such as partnering with the NAACP, schools and others.

Expansion of SRO program with more officers to deepen trust between officers and youth.

It is well-understood that our society underinvests in social welfare programs and as a result police spend a great deal of time managing people who “fall through the cracks” - people struggling with alcohol and drug addiction, psychiatric disorders, and young people getting involved in gang-like activities presumably in search of a “family” and personal identity. These interactions can evolve quickly into dangerous situations and police must routinely make split second decisions with grave consequences.