

Police Transparency & Accountability Task Force Young Adult Listening Sessions: 18 - 25 Yr Old

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To Whom it May Concern,

I'll start my testimony by saying that my perspective comes from a white woman, a mother of a son in recovery for addiction. He has taught me a lot over the years, I've come to believe he has a deep need for justice, and that he put a lot on the line to wake me up from my complacency. He is the reason I lift my voice. My community has a lot of mothers who carry this pain, and the legacy of addiction in our city will need us working together to find healing. I'm grateful for the potential I see in who we are, and who we can be, as a city. We can answer the call with dignity.

My son's heroin addiction put me in the position of advocate and observer, but also participant in navigating the systems in New Haven. For a town who pioneered harm-reduction and community policing, I often found myself asking questions about what help is when you're in such a situation, not only who defines it, but how is it delivered, and how do we engage our most vulnerable citizens to help if the help doesn't feel like help to those who need it most.

In 2013, on my birthday, I received a call from NHPD, my son was at the station again, I needed to come. He was 17. My husband and I arrived at the station and two officers brought my son out, one marine sized man on either side of a 17 year old boy. His face was covered in blood and tears, and asphalt. The officers looked noticeably surprised to see the two of us, holding hands and united, there to pick up what they had already treated as trash. When I asked, "who did this to you?" one of the officers said, "we did, ma'am." They went on to explain that when they asked him to come over, he did without issue. When they smelled the pot in his bag, he flinched, recognizing he had been caught. He flinched. They threw him to the ground and kned him repeatedly, holding his head to the asphalt to the point of bleeding from multiple wounds up and down his face. I'll never forget as we stood there in the front entryway, they pointed to the door, right there across from the glassed in officers where you check in to the police station, "if you want to file a complaint, it's through that door." I didn't. I didn't feel safe to. I kept that story and continued to seek a better way to meet the needs of the kids in New Haven. He flinched.

I was a part of the Community Foundation's Neighborhood Leadership Program, I wanted to build restorative community in New Haven (still do). We were taught the importance of one-on-one meetings, and finding out what already takes place in the systems we wanted to address. Already involved in Youth Stat, I was at an event where I drummed up the courage to walk up to Chief Esserman. I had read about his record in Community Policing, I wanted to hear more about his efforts to build that work in New Haven. His response? "Who are you and who are you to ask me instead of the *seven people below me*?" I'll never forget how small he tried to make me feel, and how much that contradicted what I knew to be true of the word "community." Words and actions matter. But I wasn't about to let that get the best of me. I attended weekly CompStat meetings, in order to be a face of accountability. Later that year, I photographed Tracey Meares' wedding. He was in the backyard crowd and I remember looking him in the eye often, as if to say, "I'm not going anywhere." Grace Lee Boggs' reminder to stay put was with me.

Still struggling with my teen, it was 2014, fall, still light at 9pm when I got a call. My son, in the back of a police car, called me to let me know he was being detained. He was back in school for the first time in over a year, just out of recovery, and had nothing on him. He was walking home from a friend's, and ran into 3 kids he knew from Edgewood School on Sherman Avenue. The police officer's account of what happened, again, aligned with my son's. He and the three kids came together on the corner, which caught the attention of the officer. All four were searched and were found to have nothing on them. My son didn't have identification and used the shortened version of his name, rather than his full name (which no one calls him). He was handcuffed and put in the car, he called from there, frustrated and confused. The officers could not come up with a reason to arrest him, but yet, when I arrived, the PD van and three police cars were at the scene. They continued to escalate the situation, in spite of the lack of a charge. In the end, they gave him a ticket for loitering, because the pressure back at the station was to get the numbers up on that corner. I honestly thought they were out of their minds, he was a puny kid, yes with drug issues, but what made them think it was necessary to have that much on hand for loitering? They called him a bitch and a pussy for calling me, they couldn't have known it was the only time he had asked for my help. I hated that I kept being grateful that he was white.

There were other situations with our son, he was quite a mess for several years. But we loved him through it, which is every parent's hope and right. There were other situations in his friend circle. The most tragic, of course, is Robby Talbot. Robby Talbot's death in the detention center was painful. We knew him, he was not a violent man. Help for Robby didn't look like help. In the intersections of mental health, addiction, and race, people lose their humanity.

Volunteering at Riverside only added to my deep frustration with over-policing. As an alternative high school, our students have been raised in systems that have not served their needs from the beginning, punitive measures only exasperate the issues they already face. The need for de-escalation training and very careful consideration of who to put in SRO positions, or any school position is clear. We have no SRO policy (the MOU is so out of date that it is not valid with the state), the agreement between the schools and the police should align with the learning goals of the building, evidence based practices that foster learning. Instead I found an officer who's escalation of issues often put students on edge, and undermined their capacity to learn. In a complaint I filed against him in 2019, the officer had thrown a student against a wall, threatened to taze him and as he left the building shouted after him "I know where you live!" He stayed in our building for over 18 months without any additional training, or at least any obvious evidence of any. He walked through the building with handcuff strips, in order to police cell phones, of all things. Four students in one day were put back into the justice system for cell phones. That was this past school year.

The idea that he knows where that student lives is exactly why I didn't report the abuses I had experienced with my son. It was just recently that he left the building and was replaced with another officer, who casually held her taser as she lectured a student on whatever he was up to that day. Truth is, they are teenagers, raised in toxic stress and violence. Their actions are in line with angry teens, but the officers that I've experienced (excluding a previous officer, Baker who retired) are inappropriate in a school building. I don't feel unsafe with these teens generally, I feel unsafe when they are pushed, and I feel unsafe when officers are not given training that welcomes students into their learning community without feeling threatened as they walk into the door.

We are a family committed to making things in New Haven work better for our community, but especially our communities of color. To serve and protect is the work of all of us as a community. We have to hold systems accountable as they act in our name. I know I'm not telling you anything new

there. But when help doesn't look like help, underrepresented people are marginalized from what they are actually saying they need. They are grieving. We are pepper spraying people who are grieving. We are arresting people who are grieving. They go back to families who've been conditioned to believe, as I did, maybe they deserved it.

That's messed up.

It is essential that the Board of Education build an SRO policy that appoints well trained officers in de-escalation and restorative practices, that align with the learning goals of our schools. There must be support for teachers as well. They can't handle what we have already broken. It is going to take a lot of hands to correct the harm in education.

I am asking that all security staff be held accountable to restorative practices. The punitive nature of our systems is not based in evidence. The everyday actions of systems and people who are "just doing their jobs" have to be questioned; are we serving the needs of learners?

I have no way of knowing if any of the officers I've mentioned are still a part of NHPD, but they were all young enough at the time, I can only assume they are. I know the issues of the terms of contracts make for a difficult change. The issues are systemic, and they have to change and align with our other policies. Community Policing under Esserman was a lie. Many incidents later, his legacy remains. Chief Reyes seems to be of a different cloth, and I'm hopeful. But what happens, happens in our name. We stay put because we care about our community. We stay put because we want to see our community heal. I'm not going away.

Respectfully,

JoAnne Wilcox

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