

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Laurel LaPorte-Grimes. I am a resident of Manchester and an Organizer with Uniting for a Safe Inclusive Community – Manchester. I would like to submit testimony on LCO 3471 An Act Concerning Police Accountability.

I am heartened that the legislature is considering this robust bill during Special Session. It is far past time that we work to develop ways of demilitarizing and transforming our police departments and ensuring that they are accountable to the communities they are sworn to serve, and yet so frequently do not serve in an equitable fashion.

It is important to remember that the reason we are re-examining our systems of policing is that we as a society are at a point where it is harder to ignore the fact that this system disproportionately impacts Black and Brown members of our communities. It is no secret that our system of modern day policing descended from slave patrols, and yet we have conveniently ignored this fact as long as we possibly could. It is important to not lose sight of this fact as we examine this bill, because this informs the reasons we need anti-racism training, true transparency and accountability and the ability to hold rogue police officers accountable in a court of law. We are tasking you, our legislators, with doing two things at once: a) transforming a militarized system that has been designed to control one group of people to the benefit of another, while claiming it is benefitting us all, and b) ensuring that those individual officers that are harming people in our community are held accountable.

In many ways this bill does not go far enough in transforming our current system of policing. However, there are many aspects of this bill that I think are critical to moving forward together. Here are some of the points that I think are especially important:

- Training: Ensuring that all officers receive the same training is important. Especially important is the inclusion of explicit intentional and effective anti-racism training on an on-going basis. This kind of learning takes time, active participation, reflection and introspection and the content should be based on research into what works and evaluated on a regular basis.
- Public Records: It is crucial that the public have access to all records of any complaints filed, regardless of the disposition of those complaints. Without this level of transparency, we are unable to have true accountability.
- Civilian Review Boards: Another critical component of accountability is effective Civilian Review Boards. This means that they should have access to all records necessary to do their job of oversight, and this requires subpoena power.
- Body Cameras and Dash Cams: It is unclear if cameras will ultimately be effective in holding police accountable, and questions remain around victim privacy and access to the recordings. However, it does seem like overall having access to recordings of police brutality has certainly moved us forward in this conversation. As we move forward with ensuring that all officers have body cameras, we need to ensure that cameras will be turned on and views not intentionally obstructed. In addition, we need to ensure that there is independent access to recordings and that they cannot be tampered with.

- **Consent Searches & Documentation:** If police do not have probable cause to search a car or person they should not be allowed to ask for consent to do so. We know that police officers routinely concentrate resources in Black and Brown communities, resulting in higher criminalization of populations in these communities. We should not allow police officers to go on fishing expeditions on top of this. And it should never be the case that officers are requesting for any documentation other than the driver's license of the person driving the vehicle. We do not live in a country where we are required to present identification for existing. Asking for this information continue to criminalize communities that are already over-policed.
- **Police Using Military Equipment:** There is no reason that our local police forces need to have access to military equipment. Our communities are not at war. The increasing militarization of our police force increases the likelihood of escalation and endangers the lives of our community members, especially our Black and Brown communities.
- **Elimination of Qualified Immunity:** It is crucial that any police officer engaging in misconduct be able to be held accountable in the courts. This is a powerful tool that our communities can use to ensure justice. It has been demonstrated time and time again that even when we have video-taped evidence of clear violence against Black and Brown people and/or violations of their civil rights, the criminal court system has not responded in holding officers accountable. NO one should have blanket permission to abuse and kill people and this is what our police officers have had to date. We cannot ignore the fact that this is one of the major reasons we need to reform our police system, and is THE reason we are doing so at this particular time in history. I would also argue that corrections officers should also be included in this part of the legislation, as this is also an area where accountability is truly necessary. Yes, this will mean that police officers and corrections officers would need to carry liability insurance and there are ways in which this can be made economically feasible for those that are not engaging in misconduct, which should be explored. Eliminating qualified immunity will serve as an incentive for officers to refrain from engaging in misconduct. And for those that continue to do so, it will serve as a penalty.

As I mentioned above, I am in favor of many aspects of this bill. However, there are also provisions for which I am not in favor and ways in which I think this bill could be more effective at creating safe communities for us all. In order to truly transform our police systems, we need to:

- **Require the Removal of School Resource Officers:** This bill should include a requirement that school resources officers be removed from public schools and replaced by additional mental health professionals. Studies have shown that having a police force in a school does not create a safer environment more conducive to learning, and in fact, is a contributing factor in the disproportionate number of Black and Brown children being criminalized and imprisoned. Having additional social workers and counselors, however, would create a safer learning environment, especially coupled with anti-racism training at all levels in our schools. Resources should be provided to municipalities in order for this to happen.

- Reduce Policing in our Communities: There are many situations that our police officers are currently tasked with responding to which would be much better served by other systems. I do NOT think that social workers should be employed by the police department (which this bill would require). I DO think that social workers, mental health professionals and medical professionals are much better equipped to handle situations where people are experiencing mental health crises, homelessness and drug overdoses. I think resources can be redirected from police forces into the community to deal with these needs as well as domestic dispute mediation, crowd control, non-violent disturbances, sexual abuse, missing persons, and other issues not requiring an armed response. I would argue for municipalities to receive MORE funds to create systems of dispatch and training of community members to ensure that the most supportive community response is possible. I do NOT support municipalities receiving additional funds for policing our communities.

We cannot address police violence and reform our police system without acknowledging the fact that Black and Brown communities are not made safer by having police forces. Black and Brown communities are over-policed, over-criminalized and disproportionately affected by police violence. These are facts. In order to address these facts, we must transform those systems and better support our communities. Overall, this bill is a firm step in this direction. I look forward to its passage, and to working together to move forward from here toward safer communities for us all.

Sincerely,

Laurel LaPorte-Grimes, PhD  
Organizer, Uniting for a Safe Inclusive Community - Manchester