

Cherryhomes: Civilian Police Review Board still needed

Written by Jackie Cherryhomes
Wednesday, 07 August 2013 15:00



Most of us will never know the challenges and pressures faced by police officers. To a great extent they handle this stress with professionalism and poise. Unfortunately, some members of the police force cannot handle these difficult circumstances.

Over the past two weeks, we have watched as five Minneapolis police officers, in two separate off-duty incidents, be accused of bullying, racist, and violent behavior.

One of the incidents, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, was recorded and has gone viral. It is hard to watch, in part because it is so ugly, and in part because our heads hang so low at the sheer embarrassment of it. It's all there - racially charged language that is scalding, extraordinary profanity, brazen disrespect for their peers on the Green Bay force, slurs against their own police chief, and the kind of charged-up energy and threatening behavior that says "way too much alcohol."

And perhaps the worst thing to witness... The off-duty Minneapolis cops' arrogant and demanding belief that they were entitled to special treatment regardless of what they had just said and done.

These police incidents came just days after many Minneapolitans – I am guessing mostly white - publicly and privately voiced a heart-felt belief that "Trayvon Martin couldn't happen here."

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Unfortunately, the truth is beyond painful.

Yes, we have a lot of great things going for us in Minneapolis, including strong faith community, community organizations, sections of government, employers, individuals and, yes, good cops, working to make this a better city every day.

But these allegations stop us in our tracks. They mirror back at us a complex reality. Communities of color, and folks on the economic margin, have generations of observations and experiences that feed a general distrust of the police, in our city and others across the country. In the face of this mistrust, our police are asked to uphold and enforce the law and our ideal standards for behavior, which reflect how we believe things should be, while we send them in to be exposed to what the rest of us cannot do: make sense of and take action in situations where people and society are at their very worst. Now several of our 840-some sworn officers have been nabbed acting like the volatile crowd bashers they contend with every day.

The Minneapolis Police chief is moving forward quickly with a plan. The officers are on leave and hopefully will experience just consequences swiftly, and the police federation - the police officers' bargaining unit - has closed ranks with department leadership to say there is no room for cops with these attitudes on the force.

I couldn't agree more.

But the police should not be relied upon to govern themselves. That is why I would reconstitute the Civilian Police Review Board. As mayor, I would work with the community to develop a structure for this oversight body that includes attorneys, retired police officers and others with a citizen chair. We need to change the culture of the police department and we can start to do so by restoring civilian oversight.

As mayor, I will make it a top priority to nurture a police environment that does not tolerate racism, bias, and bullying arrogance. Officer screening, selection, and training must be continually reviewed and improved. A clear expectation for attitude and action must be in place, including a disciplinary route with swift consequences that weeds out problem cops.

I will work to increase and improve the support given to officers after heartbreaking and violent incidents; encourage a system that requires guided discussion on the challenges of policing in historically distrustful communities, and how to act and take action to improve that trust; and support a culture of moderation, including strengthened procedures to assist – and insist - that officers get help for alcohol or drug abuse.

Again, most cops are professionals who take their position and the law seriously. Everyone has a right to policing that is unbiased and even-handed. Such a police force deserves the respect of the people it protects. Getting there will take some big changes, including a willingness for our cops and our people to take a risk and trust the other side. I believe we can make this city better for everyone, and as mayor, this is what I will be working for.