

Another Voice: Build on progress in police reforms

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By Sarah Wooton and Denise Walden

Recently, the Buffalo Police Department has announced two promising changes: It will start a body camera program and seek state accreditation. These address two of 32 recommendations in “Collaboration, Communication and Community-Building: A New Model of Policing for 21st Century Buffalo,” a 2016 report by the Partnership for the Public Good and Open Buffalo. These changes require careful implementation, however, and they must be accompanied by other reforms.

Body cameras can benefit both officers and civilians. Footage can be used to substantiate citizen claims of use of excessive force or to exonerate officers of unsubstantiated claims. Research suggests that both officers and residents behave better when being filmed.

But the policies that govern body cameras will be crucial to their success. First, the department’s policy should outline exactly when officers must turn their cameras on, and establish consequences for violating this rule. Second, the policy should protect the privacy of vulnerable individuals, such as children. Third, it should make footage available to the public through an independent committee. In cities where footage is controlled by the police, body cameras lose credibility and value. Lastly, the body camera policy should be easily available to the public (currently, the department does not put its policy manual on its website).

In addition, the department has announced that it will seek outside accreditation, as required by the City Charter. This long-awaited move will provide an outside set of expert eyes to review policies and practices and suggest improvements. To ensure that it

receives accreditation, the department should promptly negotiate with its union to begin annual performance reviews of all officers – a glaring gap in its current management practices.

While accreditation and body cameras are promising, they cannot be the only improvements. In Open Buffalo's 2016 survey of more than 2,000 Buffalonians, only 20 percent of residents felt that the police respected people of color. The policing report's 32 concrete recommendations are based on policies that have succeeded in other cities. Two examples are instituting "fix-it" tickets for minor offenses and requiring all officers to commit hours to community policing activities like foot patrols and attending community meetings.

Finally, it was disturbing that the Common Council canceled the Police Oversight Committee meeting scheduled for July after Police Commissioner Daniel Derenda said he could not attend.

The department should be seeking more, not fewer, opportunities to meet with lawmakers and citizens to discuss public safety and ideas for change. This is especially so given the infrequency of these meetings and the unanswered questions surrounding the deaths of Wardel Davis and Jose Hernandez-Rossy. Buffalo needs policing that is more community-based, open and accountable – and those changes cannot happen without real citizen engagement.

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