



**National Network  
For Safe Communities  
at JOHN JAY COLLEGE**

## **POLICE LEADERS ACKNOWLEDGE PAST HARM**

### EXAMPLES

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Law enforcement leaders from around the United States are increasingly beginning to address past harms through clear acknowledgements of their profession's historical missteps and strong statements regarding a new vision for police conduct. These statements reflect a belief in the responsibility to acknowledge previous ills, and the conviction that recognition of the resulting harm is the first step toward building community trust, and shaping a more just law enforcement culture. The following are examples of public statements made by prominent police officials acknowledging these past harms.

#### **BILL BRATTON—POLICE COMMISSIONER, NEW YORK, NY**

In February 2015, New York City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton delivered a powerful statement on the harm that law enforcement has caused, and on responsibilities that all police officers share to rectify the current situation.

Some of the worst parts of black history would have been impossible without a perverted, oppressive law and order, too. Slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, lynchings, blockbusting. None of us did these things. None of us were troopers on the bridge at Selma. But it doesn't matter that these things happened before many of us were even born. What matters is that our history follows us like a second shadow. We can never underestimate the impact these had. The hate, and the injustice, and the lost opportunities—for all of us. But where does this leave us, the police? Because law and order should never be the tool of oppression, not today. And while unfairness and inequality persist, we, as police, face a truth that some others would rather deny [...] We cannot forget what is behind us, nor the legacies still with us—but we cannot ignore the duty laid before us. As police, that duty is two-fold: As police, we must prevent crime and disorder. As police, we must fix what we've done and what we continue to do wrong. It's ours to set right. It's the crisis, it's the challenge, it's the opportunity.

## **KEVIN MURPHY—CHIEF OF POLICE, MONTGOMERY, AL**

Montgomery local, Freedom Rider, and Congressman, the civil rights leader John Lewis received his first-ever apology for the failure of Montgomery, Alabama to protect him, his fellow Freedom Riders, and the African American communities of the city. In March 2013, more than 50 years after the Freedom Riders arrived in Montgomery, Chief of Police Kevin Murphy delivered a powerful apology and offered his badge to Congressman Lewis, who graciously accepted both the apology and the badge, “on behalf of so many people.”

I want to apologize. We failed to protect you and the other Freedom Riders. In 1961, Montgomery police were not very good to you. But today, we're a better department... When you got off the bus in 1961, you didn't have a friend in this part...And I want you to know that you have friends in Montgomery Police Department, that we're for you, we're with you. We want to respect the law and adhere the law, which is what you were trying to do all along. This symbol of authority which used to be a symbol of oppression needs to be a symbol of reconciliation. Fifty-two years ago, what you stood for has made a difference. The world that we live in today, this city that I get to serve as police chief is changed for the better because I wouldn't be standing here right now if it weren't for you. And this is a token of that appreciation, Congressman, because you changed this city. You changed this state. You changed this country. And as Pastor Moore said, you changed the world. And for that we are truly grateful to you.

I want everyone in the movement, in the struggle to know, your voices were heard...We are not your father's MPD, and that is very true we are not. We are going to move forward as one Montgomery, One MPD, and we're going to continue to work at it. There's still a lot of work to be done, we know that. We in the Police Department have to make that first move to build the trust back in our community that was once lost because...we enforced unjust laws. Those unjust laws were immoral and wrong, but you know what, it's a new day, and it's a new police department.

## **DERMOT SHEA - POLICE COMMISSIONER, NEW YORK, NY**

In a Black History Month address to the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce on February 23, 2021, Commissioner Dermot Shea opened with stories about Black NYPD officers and their acts of heroism and service to the community. He continued:

Those are the stories I want to tell. But they're also the stories you already know. We might all be better-served today by heartfelt reflections on the past year.

The killing of George Floyd didn't happen in New York City, but it was certainly felt in New York City. And conversations about a racial reckoning are happening everywhere. While some of it has

been painful, I know that in the long run—for policing and for our city and our country—it’s a very, very good thing.

I believe we have an opportunity in this moment to move forward together on a path toward building mutual trust, and redoubling our efforts to create a shared vision for public safety in our communities. As I said, it’s all about trust. And how do we, as a police department, earn that from all the people we serve?

First, there must be a hard, honest moment of truth. We must acknowledge the uncomfortable, inconvenient, but undeniable truth that more than 400 years ago, a caste system based on a narrative of racial difference was used to justify almost 250 years of slavery, followed by more than 150 years of systemic racism.

These many years of racist policies and practices have caused—and continue to cause—immeasurable harm, trauma, discrimination, and injustice for so many in the United States. It exists in all aspects of society, including in policing. Police have always been an inexorable part of that story. Whether it was arresting runaway slaves or enforcing unjust Jim Crow laws, this has been a stain on law enforcement’s history in America. We have to acknowledge this truth – and I do. And we must acknowledge the NYPD’s historical role in the mistreatment of communities of color. I am sorry.

I’m not in a position to apologize on behalf of all law enforcement, everywhere—that’s beyond my standing. But I can certainly speak for the members of the New York City Police Department, both past and present, by publicly recognizing that we have inherited the burden of our collective history.

Our challenge today is to ensure that we will not participate in, or tolerate, any further inequality or injustice.

Across our nation, the history of racism did not start with the police. America has fostered generations of injustice. Communities of color have been—and remain—underserved when it comes to quality education, housing, health care, social services and job opportunities. That contributes to unending poverty, hopelessness, and crime—which leads to disproportionate criminal justice impact.

All of us—police departments and all sectors of society—must look in the mirror and seize this moment in history if we are to truly achieve our country’s guiding, yet unrealized, vision of equality and justice for all.

## **DAVID C. COUPER—FORMER CHIEF OF POLICE, MADISON, WI**

After retiring, Chief David C. Couper continued to push for new approaches to policing as an author and advocate. In 2014 he wrote a piece called, “Trusting Police: The Case for Apology from a Veteran Police Chief,” saying:

I served as a police officer and chief for over 30 years. Since my retirement I have continued to comment and write about the need for police improvement. It is my opinion that in order to restore trust between police and the communities they serve, our nation’s police must collectively apologize, just as Kevin Murphy did. It is what we need today to begin to heal the relationships between blacks and police. It is the only way to move past events of Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, and the residual effects we all have inherited from slavery, Jim Crow, and pernicious and residual racial discrimination.

## **GARRY MCCARTHY—POLICE SUPERINTENDENT, CHICAGO, IL**

Shortly after taking over the Chicago Police Department in 2011, Superintendent Garry McCarthy delivered a strong statement acknowledging police harm and why that is an essential step forward for police and communities.

I understand the historical divide between police and communities of color—it’s rooted in the history of this country. The most visible arm of government is a police force, and the institutionalized governmental programs that promoted racist policies that were enforced by police departments in this country are part of the African American history in this country. And we have to recognize it because recognition is the first step towards finding a cure towards what is ailing us.

Over the years we’ve actually done a lot of things wrong and I’m willing to admit that. A lot of police executives are defensive. We’ve done a lot wrong.

## **CHUCK JORDAN—CHIEF OF POLICE, TULSA, OK**

Chief Chuck Jordan of Tulsa, Oklahoma took an opportunity in 2013 to offer an apology on behalf of the Tulsa Police Department for wrongdoings the police had committed over 90 years before during the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921.

I can’t apologize for the actions, inactions, or derelictions of those individual officers or their chief, but as your chief today, I can apologize for our police department. I am sorry and distressed that the Tulsa Police Department did not protect its citizens during the tragic days of 1921. I’ve heard

things said like “Well that was a different time.” That excuse doesn’t hold water with me. I’ve been a Tulsa police officer since 1969 and I’ve witnessed scores of different times, and not once did I ever consider these changing times somehow relieve me of my obligations of my oath of office and to protect the lives of my fellow Tulsans.

I’m also going to tell you this is not the same police department it was in 1921. I hope that the dedication and commitment that your officers demonstrated in the wake of the Good Friday killings shows our community that hate motivated crimes or any other [unclear] visited upon our citizens will not be tolerated and that perpetrators will be brought to justice...While we should never forget the crimes and injustices that occurred in 1921, you can rest assured that your police department today will never allow such an atrocity to occur. We will be at the frontlines to protect your lives, your families, and your property. We took an oath to do so, and your police department today will honor that oath.

## **JAMES COMEY—DIRECTOR, FBI**

In February 2015, FBI Director James Comey delivered a speech at Georgetown University titled, “Hard Truths: Law Enforcement and Race.” His statements on the history of policing are among the highest-level acknowledgments of police wrongdoing by any government official.

All of us in law enforcement must be honest enough to acknowledge that much of our history is not pretty. At many points in American history, law enforcement enforced the status quo, a status quo that was often brutally unfair to disfavored groups... That experience should be part of every American’s consciousness, and law enforcement’s role in that experience—including in recent times—must be remembered. It is our cultural inheritance...One reason we cannot forget our law enforcement legacy is that the people we serve and protect cannot forget it, either. So we must talk about our history. It is a hard truth that lives on.

We have spent the 150 years since Lincoln spoke [at Gettysburg] making great progress, but along the way treating a whole lot of people of color poorly. And law enforcement was often part of that poor treatment. That’s our inheritance as law enforcement and it is not all in the distant past. We must account for that inheritance. And we—especially those of us who enjoy the privilege that comes with being the majority—must confront the biases that are inescapable parts of the human condition. We must speak the truth about our shortcomings as law enforcement, and fight to be better.

## **JIM FEALY—CHIEF OF POLICE, HIGH POINT, NC**

In preparation for working with an angry neighborhood to shut down a long-established open-air drug market in 2004, Chief Jim Fealy designed a process that included meeting with the community to discuss its history with law enforcement. Chief Fealy approached this process with the understanding that not doing wrong is not the same as doing things right, reflecting in 2016:

We work real hard, we put a lot of effort in to what we do, but shame on us for not seeing what everyone else is seeing...that we're spinning our wheels and not getting anywhere and not doing any good. And not only that, but the way we go about this, when we get more and more frustrated, what happens is we become more aggressive in our tactics, and that's not what you want, that's not what you're asking for. You're asking for the problem to be taken care of without your community being turned in to a war zone by us. Shame on us for not being smart enough to realize that we needed to change gears.

As far as I was concerned, the day I became the chief there I was responsible for everything that ever had happened and was getting ready to happen between the police department and the people of High Point...It didn't matter that I'd only been there a week...If I'm going to be the Chief of Police, it's my department, good and bad and if something's wrong it's up to me to fix it, and it's up to me to try to do things that work to produce desirable results, not undesirable results.

## **CAMERON MCLAY—CHIEF OF POLICE, PITTSBURGH, PA**

On New Year's Eve 2014, Pittsburgh Police Chief Cameron McLay stopped in to a coffee shop during a parade through the city. Inside, McLay found a group of activists making signs and engaged them in discussion about race, bias, and policing. They asked him to hold a sign that read "I RESOLVE TO CHALLENGE RACISM @ WORK" and "#END WHITE SILENCE." Chief McLay held the sign and shared a photograph of himself with the sign on social media, engaging in the highly active national discourse around race and policing during the time period. The event led to some criticism and a broader discussion around policing, prompting Chief McLay to reaffirm his commitment to the statement in January 2015.

The sign indicated my willingness to challenge racial problems in the workplace. I am so committed. If there are problems in the PBP related to racial injustice, I will take action to fix them. To me, the term "white silence" simply means that we must be willing to speak up to address issues of racial injustice, poverty, etc. In my heart, I believe we all must come together as community to address real world problems; and I am willing to be a voice to bring community together.

The reality of U.S. policing is that our enforcement efforts have a disparate impact on communities of color. This is a statistical fact. You know, as well as I, the social factors driving this reality. The

gross disparity in wealth and opportunity is evident in our city. Frustration and disorder are certain to follow. The predominant patterns of our city's increased violence involves Black victims as well as actors. If we are to address this violence, we must work together with our communities of color.

We, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, need to acknowledge how this reality feels to those impacted communities. Crime and disorder take us to the disadvantaged communities, which are predominantly those of color. The disparities in police arrest and incarceration rates that follow are not by design, but they can feel that way to some people in those communities.

I know, because I have been there too. My own street drug enforcement efforts were well intended but had an impact I would not have consciously chosen. In retrospect, we should have been far more engaged with those in the communities where we were doing our high-impact, zero tolerance type policing; to obtain the consent of those we were policing.

## CHARLES MCCLELLAND JR.—CHIEF OF POLICE, HOUSTON, TX

In 2015, Chief Charles McClelland Jr. published an op-ed that outlined a new vision for the Houston Police Department.

Many individuals committing minor crimes suffer from substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness and juvenile delinquency. I am not soft on crime; I know some of these individuals go on to commit very serious crimes and should be incarcerated for long periods of time when convicted. There are, however, some individuals who encounter the police and are arrested frequently for minor crimes. This type of police activity results in a lifetime sentence served one to two days at a time. As a society, we have done a poor job of addressing the root cause of minor infractions.

The majority of people who go to prison are eventually released. When released, society should be willing to take a chance on those who want and deserve a second chance. I also understand that Houston police officers are not at war with the community. We are not warriors; we are courageous guardians and protectors of our residents.

The **National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College** supports cities to implement and advance proven strategies to reduce violence and improve public safety, minimize arrest and incarceration, strengthen communities, and improve relationships between law enforcement and communities.

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