



# A Path Toward Safe and Equitable Cities

Recommendations from the NLC  
Reimagining Public Safety Task Force

# Letter from NLC CEO and Executive Director

The National League of Cities (NLC) has been supporting cities as they review their current public safety systems and consider new, equitable, and innovative visions of local safety. After a deeply inspirational conversation with Mayors and Councilmembers during a National Forum held in September 2020, we knew that we had to bring together our members to discuss this important issue of public safety for all residents and what can be done better.

George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Walter Wallace Jr., Elijah McClain -- all names we know due to their untimely deaths at the hands of local law enforcement. For Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities, these names represent a long and contentious history with law enforcement. We know that it will take a collaborative effort to stop this list of names from growing. I am proud to see cities leading the charge on rethinking public safety and utilizing their influence to bring together stakeholders, change policy and address the historic struggles that members of their communities' face.

Reimagining public safety is about evolving public safety systems, sustaining positive reforms, and managing this heavy task along with the daily challenges of local elected officials.

In February of 2021, NLC launched the Reimagining Public Safety Task Force made up of local leaders from across the country. Our work with the Task Force provided us an opportunity to meet the moment and support local leadership in their transformations. During the past several months, NLC Task Force members uplifted safety initiatives, ideas and conversations and they supported one another during challenging times for our country.

I want to thank Mayor Ras Baraka and Mayor David Holt for leading our Task Force, our partners for their collaboration and the Jonh D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for supporting our work. It was so great to see our task force members come together around these recommendations, and I hope that through this work, we will collectively inspire and support transformation.

NLC is committed to supporting cities. We recognize that this is not easy work—but it is necessary to achieve new visions of safety and we are here as a partner to help local leaders navigate challenges alongside their communities.

Thank you,



CLARENCE E. ANTHONY  
CEO and Executive Director  
National League of Cities

# Letter from Co-Chairs

The murder of George Floyd was a turning point for our country, a moment that resonated with Americans everywhere, causing many to take to the streets in numbers not seen in decades. As elected officials, we have an obligation to listen to our residents in these moments and to act.

We believe that any function of government can be improved, and that includes the delivery of public safety. The trauma and pain experienced by residents due to systemic disinvestment in communities - specifically in Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities- must be addressed holistically and through transformations that start at the local level. This demands a hard look at each community's vision for public safety, accountability, and the opportunity for residents to not only to be consulted about desired outcomes but also to fully own the process of reimagining public safety.

While we know there is a lot of work ahead to meet these challenges, local leaders across the country are taking steps towards innovation in public safety. They are in fact, re-imagining the design, structure, standards, and effectiveness of public safety for their communities. The NLC Reimagining Public Safety Task Force was formed in hopes of coming together around a set of recommendations and action items for city leaders and their communities.

Our initial goals were to:

- ◆ Set out a 21st-century public safety agenda for America's communities;
- ◆ Highlight promising public safety and justice reform practices in municipalities and identify key areas for improvement and opportunities to scale;
- ◆ Amplify the voices of local leaders in justice reform and public safety.

Over several months, we held meetings and listening sessions – digging deep into what cities, experts and communities were feeling, uplifting and doing to move toward a more equitable vision of public safety. Much of our work was supported by national experts including the Vera Institute of Justice, Urban Institute, Cities United and John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

The result of this work is a set of recommendations for cities to consider- included in this report. Additionally, a supplemental toolkit is set for release to serve as a guide as to how to best move toward implementation. As the co-chairs of the Reimagining Public Safety Task Force- we are proud to support and encourage municipalities across the country in carrying out these recommendations through local action.

Mayor Ras J Baraka  
NEWARK, NJ

Mayor David Holt  
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK



# Reimagining Public Safety Task Force Membership

## Co-Chairs



**Ras J. Baraka,**  
Mayor  
Newark, NJ



**David Holt**  
Mayor  
Oklahoma City, OK

## Members



**Jay H. Banks**  
Councilmember  
New Orleans, LA



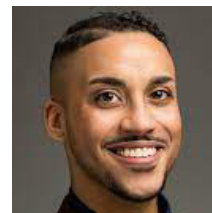
**Keith Blocker**  
Deputy Mayor  
Tacoma, WA



**Sharon Weston Broome**  
Mayor  
Baton Rouge, LA



**Joe Buscaino**  
Councilmember  
Los Angeles, CA



**Phillipe Cunningham**  
Councilmember  
Minneapolis, MN



**Cameron Diehl**  
State League Director  
Utah League of Cities  
and Towns



**John Engen**  
Mayor  
Missoula, MT



**Nikki Fortunato-Bas**  
Council President  
Oakland, CA



**Jamie R. Gauthier**  
Councilmember  
Philadelphia, PA



**Tim Keller**  
Mayor  
Albuquerque, NM



**Chantia Lewis**  
Aldерwoman  
Milwaukee, WI



**Janeese Lewis-George**  
Councilmember  
Washington, DC



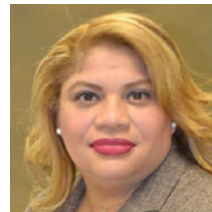
**Willie Lightfoot**  
Council Vice President  
Rochester, NY



**D. Love**  
Mayor  
Centerville, MN



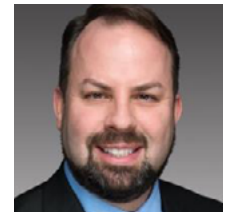
**Gene McGee**  
Mayor  
Ridgeland, MS



**Aidee Nieves**  
Council President  
Bridgeport, CT



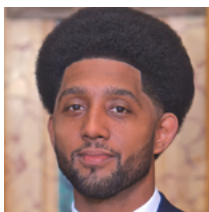
**Steven Reed**  
Mayor  
Montgomery, AL



**Emmanuel V. Remy**  
Councilmember  
Columbus, OH



**Monica Rodriguez**  
Councilmember  
Los Angeles, CA



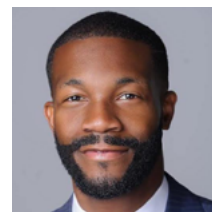
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Mayor  
Baltimore, MD



**Linda Thompson**  
Councilmember  
Spokane Valley, WA



**Vince Williams**  
Mayor  
Union City, GA



**Randall L. Woodfin**  
Mayor  
Birmingham, AL





## Introduction

The year 2020 was historic for many reasons. In addition to the onset of a global pandemic, municipal leaders heard outcries to reimagine public safety ring louder than ever. The murder of George Floyd sparked international outrage and local leaders took notice. In addition to George Floyd, names like Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Tony McDade and more became synonymous with the movement toward justice due to their tragic loss of life.

Whereas many factors positively influence public safety from the physical environment to access to quality healthcare, to education and employment, municipalities all too often treat public safety as the function of law enforcement alone. Historically and up to today- Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities face disparate negative impacts of these systems. To truly reimagine public safety, recognition of this history and how it led to the national uprising of 2020, is an important first step.

**What the Data Tells Us: [The Washington Post](#) has been tracking fatal police shootings since 2015. At a rate of 37 per million, Black Americans are more than twice as likely to be killed by police than White Americans. The tracker also reveals disparities in both Latinx and Indigenous communities.**

**“The interconnected nature of mental health, physical health, police violence, community violence and trauma has reached a boiling point and it is up to all of us as elected officials to think beyond what we have always done.”**

COUNCILMEMBER JAMIE GAUTHIER, Philadelphia, PA

The reliance on police to maintain systems of public safety results in overwhelmed departments and the overutilization of jails and prisons- which subsequently cause harm to many communities. Community centered, equitable public safety systems better engage diverse stakeholders and leverage resources to collaboratively address safety issues.

For over six months, NLC’s Reimagining Public Safety Task Force held meetings and listening sessions to highlight local innovations and evidence-based practices in areas such as violence intervention and interruption, alternative response, youth and young adult engagement, the use of credible messengers, accountability and more. Made up of Mayors and Councilmembers from a diverse set of cities, the Task Force openly explored innovation, discussed hardships and committed to make change.

To fulfill the promise of this unique moment and their collective goals, the NLC Reimagining Public Safety Task Force recommends that city leaders consider acting in five interrelated areas based on local landscapes and community needs.





## RECOMMENDATION ONE

### Direct municipal government leadership toward providing safety and well-being for all

The time has come for the leaders of the nation's cities, towns, and villages to declare that community safety requires a broader and more holistic definition including the components of public health and well-being, and that cities can make structural changes to align local policies to this new definition.

Our present framing for public safety is insufficient. The framework needs expansion beyond the traditional use of the word safety to embrace a far broader set of conditions and circumstances that center public health or more simply, well-being.

This focus on public health places an emphasis on living conditions free of hazards that cause illness or contribute to housing instability; on the availability of jobs that pay a living wage; on access to well-maintained open spaces and a built environment that delivers clean air and water, usable streets, and reliable technology connections.

This requires deep and complex public discussions and joint decisions about shared goals. In addition, the indicators and measurements to determine progress on these goals will necessarily change and expand. Instead of only measuring, for example, arrest rates or jail populations, new descriptors of improvements will measure housing conditions, economic mobility opportunities, and racial equity outcomes.

**“We medicate or incarcerate- we do not address those root causes, those fundamental issues- issues around income inequality, racism, classism, sexism (the list goes on and on). We are treating symptoms- but we hope to eventually get to the cure.”**

MAYOR JOHN ENGEN, Missoula, MT





## RECOMMENDATION TWO

### Balance the respective roles of government agencies, residents, and partners.

Implementing a new, balanced framework for public safety and well-being, in a manner that promotes trust, requires city leaders to center resident engagement processes throughout – specifically to increase the engagement and input of Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities that disproportionately face the most acute safety issues both because of disinvestment and the negative impacts of the criminal justice system. Such engagement can inform initial formation of policies and indicators as well as subsequent reviews of results and lay the groundwork for structuring new ways to manage a wide range of situations through increased transparency and collaboration.

Adjusting to the new framework also means redefining the scope and roles of government agencies, something that communities have demanded and for which many police leaders have asked, in lieu of having their departments hold perceived or actual sole responsibility for providing public safety.

Further, a broader framework necessitates involvement of the wider range of community- and county-based partners with the ability to contribute to safety and well-being. Notably, this balancing exercise implies consideration of city budget resources and other new or leveraged funds around a new vision, and aligning spending according to role, scope, and relative contributions to safety and well-being.

On July 12, 2021, the Biden-Harris administration released a memo advising Local and State Governments on how they can—and should—use the historic \$65.1 billion in local funding through the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to prevent violence and improve public safety. The memo points to early action and momentum in cities across the country to utilize the rescue plan as a catalyst for change. Both as a part of their rescue plan strategy and long-term efforts toward community safety, cities are taking the lead on strategies to address violence and crime holistically.

**“ In a bubble, we devise policies and then we wonder why people don’t get it because we haven’t brought them into the process, so I think doing it, not to the community, but with the community, is important.”**

COMMISSIONER DERMOT SHEA, NYPD



### RECOMMENDATION THREE

## **Significantly expand the use of civilian-led and community-based well-being and prevention-focused strategies.**

Building upon the momentum established in numerous cities that have already begun to see promising results, municipal leaders should expand civilian response mechanisms for emergency and crisis response calls. This entails connecting people in need to the most relevant services and support, while reducing reliance on armed, uniformed response.

In parallel, and to meet the challenge of gun and domestic violence, city leaders should ramp up use of effective community-based strategies for violence prevention, intervention, and reduction. Across crisis response and violence reduction, local leaders will do well to rely on trauma-informed practices, utilize credible messengers, and adopt restorative justice mechanisms as alternatives for dispute and conflict resolution.

**“ We (young adults) need access to equitable resources. We need support. We are in survival mode, and in that mindset one slip can be detrimental.”**

JAHTIEH POSTELL, PowerCorps Camden

#### RECOMMENDATION FOUR

### Embrace full and transparent oversight and accountability for law enforcement.

To increase trust and improve the relationship between all members of the community and local law enforcement, city leaders must address several key areas that fulfill their ultimate responsibility for public safety and well-being. This involves updating the structures for setting, publicizing, and evaluating progress of public safety and the related mechanisms for allocating resources to achieve outlined goals.

Exercising oversight to achieve accountability means evaluating and reformulating investigative, standard-setting, and disciplinary processes within the executive branch, city council, and independent civilian review bodies where such exist. It also means working with labor unions to bring the next round of contracts reached through collective bargaining into conformance with accountability-driven oversight and updated public safety and well-being goals.

**“We cannot simply keep doing what we have always done or act in performative ways to momentarily appease those we serve. Now is the time for real change.”**

COUNCILMEMBER PHILLIPE CUNNINGHAM, Minneapolis, MN







#### RECOMMENDATION FIVE

### Seek guidance and support from peers and experts with the assistance of NLC.

Beginning and pursuing a local effort to transform a city’s approach to achieving public safety represents a daunting and often thankless task for any leader. This is especially true as cities also seek to recover and rebuild from the pandemic and address multiple challenges requiring elected officials’ attention.

As part of the local decision-making process, the health and well-being of local elected leaders should also be prioritized. NLC has a strong commitment to protecting the well-being of city leaders, in part through providing structured and informal connections to peers and quick access to policy expertise and the most promising practices.

In this light, city leaders undertaking the steps described in the first four recommendations can count on NLC, as well as partners such as Vera Institute of Justice, Urban Institute, Cities United and John Jay College of Criminal Justice for support.

**“Nearly every community has been challenged this past year to evaluate its public safety functions, and every community will ultimately develop its own answers to the questions that have been raised. I think through NLC we can help each other think through what the options are, by considering what is being tried in other communities.”**

MAYOR DAVID HOLT, Oklahoma City, OK



## Conclusion

This report contains the high-level recommendations of the NLC Reimagining Public Safety Task Force, for municipal leaders to consider as they continue - or begin -- their local journey to reimagine public safety. Through collaboration with their residents, these recommendations can shape policy and practice reform and transformation of the way cities provide public safety, in a variety of ways. The supplemental NLC Reimagining Public Safety Toolkit- set for release in November 2021- will provide additional context, actionable steps for local leaders to take and tangible examples to further develop city efforts toward more equity-driven safety systems.

**“We are talking about wellness. We are talking about holistic health in our communities. That is what public safety is all about- not just the absence of violence- but the presence of wellness. We need more than the police department to create wellness. Public safety has to be expanded and put in the hands of other folks.”**

MAYOR RAS J. BARAKA, Newark, NJ

# City Spotlights

## Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

In the summer of 2020, Oklahoma City faced historic protests in its streets. Residents were not just concerned about the murder of George Floyd; they were also demanding changes in local policies and in the use of force by the Oklahoma City Police Department.

Mayor David Holt recognized immediately that all residents deserve to be heard, and he met with Black Lives Matter leaders in his office on the fourth day of the protests. Then, he met protesters in front of police headquarters -coming down personally and listening to them individually for several hours, long into the night.

Mayor Holt followed that outreach with more substantive action - the creation of **The Oklahoma City Law Enforcement Policy Task Force**, created to issue recommendations relating to use of force policies and accountability. In Oklahoma City's Council-Manager form of government, the mayor has no unilateral authority to make policy changes but can put the wheels in motion for collaborative evaluation of policies that can lead to successful revision by Council.

To develop the membership of the Task Force, Mayor Holt worked with Councilwoman Nikki Nice, who represents the historically Black sections of Oklahoma City. Mayor Holt asked retired police chief M.T. Berry, to serve as the Task Force's facilitator.

The City Council committed financial and staff resources to the task, and the Task Force hired **21CP Solutions** to consult with the group. Over the course of a year, the Task Force listened to hundreds of community leaders and groups to collect feedback. Through interviews, listening sessions and virtual connections, they heard from professionals, lawmakers, activists, organizers, religious leaders, mental health experts, advocates for people experiencing homelessness and others.

In August of 2021, the Task Force put out a **preliminary report** and made thirty-two recommendations to improve policing in the city. Among these recommendations are calls to **change the department's de-escalation policy**, improve crisis response training, create a community safety/violence interruption program and more. Oklahoma City Police Chief Wade Gourley stated publicly that he found all the recommendations to be reasonable, an encouraging sign that collaboration around this issue is possible.

By 2022, a final report from the Task Force will be presented to the Mayor and City Council, who will then consider the recommendations for adoption.



# Newark, New Jersey

Since his election in 2014, Mayor Ras J. Baraka committed his administration to **repairing a broken and corrupt public safety system** in Newark. Over the years, the City has utilized a federal consent decree as a springboard for change and increased accountability – not only of the police- but inclusive of all city agencies and actors. An impressive result of that hard work is the fact that the city did not have a single **officer fire a weapon in the year 2020.**

The journey – while not over- has not been an easy one. Mayor Baraka has acknowledged that the city still has strides to make, including tackling **disproportionate negative impacts** on black residents. But- he and his team are proud of the key aspects of public safety that they have worked to reimagine over the last six years:

- ◆ The development of a police force that is reflective of the community in terms of demographics and values (more women officers, more officers of color)
- ◆ Recognition that more police on the streets does not necessarily equate to safety (reduced the size of the force and crime simultaneously)
- ◆ A focus on police de-escalation training and attempts to strengthen the local civilian review board
- ◆ The reallocation of funds to create an office of **Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery**
- ◆ Prioritization of the **Community Street Team** as an alternative to police response
- ◆ Cohesion across system actors toward a common goal

Newark has received national recognition for the steps Mayor Baraka is taking to look at safety holistically. Ongoing collaborative work across city departments and national collaboration via the **Community Violence Intervention Collective** provide ongoing hope for continued transformation in the city.



# Appendix

## Select Resources

### General Public Safety/Justice Reform

These resources provide guidance and examples of initiatives, practice and policy to reimagine public safety and reform justice systems.

- ◆ [National League of Cities -Reimagining Policing- How Cities and States can work together](#)
- ◆ [John Jay College of Criminal Justice- The Future of Public Safety](#)
- ◆ [The Urban Institute - Community Public Safety Investment](#)
- ◆ [Cities United-Reimagining Public Safety: Moving to Safe, Healthy and Hopeful Communities](#)

### Jails/Jail Reduction

These resources outline strategies to [reduce local jail populations](#), lessen disparities and examine spending trends.

- ◆ [National League of Cities- Jail Reduction Strategies](#)
- ◆ [National League of Cities/ Policy Research Institute- Engaging Peers in Jail Reduction Strategies](#)
- ◆ [National League of Cities-Reducing the Use of Jails: Roles for City Leaders](#)
- ◆ [National League of Cities- Triage Centers- Alternatives to Jail](#)
- ◆ [Pew Charitable Trusts- Local Spending on Jails Report](#)

### Differential/Alternative Response

These resources provide local examples and promising initiatives to respond to calls for service through alternative means, with a focus on mental health, substance misuse and crisis response.

- ◆ [National League of Cities/Policy Research, Inc. Models: The roles of cities, counties, law enforcement & providers](#)
- ◆ [National League of Cities/ Arnold Ventures- Emergency Response & Crisis Stabilization](#)
- ◆ [Center for American Progress- The Community Responder Model](#)

## Violence Prevention/Reduction

Violence reduction and prevention resources include information on violence interruption and city prioritization of neighborhood safety.

- ◆ [Center for American Progress- Investing in Offices of Neighborhood Safety](#)
- ◆ [Cure Violence Global- Impact and Evidence](#)

## Policing/Public Safety Budgets

These resources focus on police practices, accountability and spending.

- ◆ [Vera Institute of Justice- What Policing Costs in America](#)
- ◆ [Brennan Center for Justice- Hidden in Plain Sight](#)
- ◆ [Coalition for Juvenile Justice- Reducing the Over policing of youth of color](#)
- ◆ [Urban Institute- Criminal Justice Expenditures](#)

## Reimagining Public Safety Task Force Timeline, Meetings & Listening Sessions

**December 2020- January 2021:** Recruitment of Task Force Chairs and Members

### Topical Listening Sessions:

- ◆ February 22, 2021- [City Leadership in Transforming Responses to Calls for Service and Violence](#)
- ◆ April 27, 2021- [Public Safety Culture: Increasing Accountability](#)
- ◆ May 6, 2021- [Public Safety Budgeting](#)
- ◆ June 29, 2021- [Young Adult Justice](#)
- ◆ July 29, 2021 - [Uplifting the Role of Credible Messengers](#)

**\*\* Full Task Force Meetings took place on January 27, March 31, and May 18, 2021.\*\***





## Acknowledgements

Alongside the Task Force chairs and NLC CEO Clarence Anthony, several NLC staff members collaborated to develop the recommendations, and to facilitate the Task Force meetings and listening sessions. These included: Andrew Moore, Kirby Gaherty, James Brooks, Yucel Ors, Stacy Richardson, Haruka Braun, and Tony McCright.

NLC gratefully acknowledges the many contributions to the Task Force process made by a group of partner organizations. Sincere thanks are due to teams from Urban Institute, Cities United, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and Vera Institute of Justice.

In addition, the NLC leadership and staff greatly appreciate the guidance, close attention, input, and feedback from members of the NLC Reimagining Public Safety Task Force, throughout the process.



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