

Statesman

Opinion

Alter: Austin can have racial justice and public safety

By Council Member Alison Alter

Posted Sep 13, 2020 at 12:01 AM

Austin needs an effective police force and Austin must address racism in its policing. We must do both.

In the midst of a contentious debate, let us not forget that every Austinite deserves to feel safe and to be treated with dignity. Those in our community who are calling to fully “defund” the police and those who demand that we simply “back the blue” are each addressing only half the issue. What the city of Austin needs, and what I have pursued since 2017, is a holistic process for pushing resistant police leadership to adopt reforms that will address racism and allow for greater public safety at the same time. Critics should address both racism *and* safety.

Early in my time at City Hall I focused on police contract reform. That work enabled us to finance 30 new officer positions each year and I voted with the council to approve these new positions. I also pushed for the creation of our city’s new Office of Police Oversight for grievances about police behavior, especially from communities of color. These accomplishments made our city safer and increased public accountability. My staff attended every police contract negotiation session, working closely with representatives from the Austin Police Department, the Austin Police Association, the Austin Justice Coalition, Grassroots Leadership, and others. The contract we adopted provided the fiscal savings needed to fund more patrol officers and improved mechanisms to address recurring complaints about unfair treatment of people of color.

In 2018 the nation learned that APD was not fully investigating sexual assault cases. Sexual assault disproportionately impacts women and people of color. In Austin, 99% of reported cases remain unresolved, and for years, DNA kits languished untested. I worked with the Survivor Justice Project, the women’s commission, victim

services, and sex crime unit staff to identify how we could better meet the needs of survivors and stop the violence, and I led council efforts to improve how sexual assault cases are processed and investigated. We increased staffing and resources for victims services, improved DNA test processing, and launched a comprehensive evaluation of our sexual assault response system. Unfortunately, police leadership continues to resist changes that would make our community safer, especially for women.

In December 2019 the City Council unanimously approved Council Member Harper-Madison's resolution to reform the police training academy, which suffered an astonishing 48 percent attrition rate. We also ordered the city manager to investigate racism in the department following reports of racist language by an assistant chief, who conveniently retired before we could investigate. We allowed the cadet class scheduled to begin in February to proceed with explicit directions that no further classes would begin without reform to the training academy. The police were supposed to update the curriculum in time for a July class. Police leadership failed to do so, and we thus postponed a new cadet class until we can train cadets to keep our city safe and implement anti-racist policies.

Recently, the City Council reinvested city funds from the cadet class in staffing and programs outside of APD, including new ambulances, mental health response, community health paramedics serving the homeless, domestic violence shelters, substance use, and violence prevention programs that will save lives and make our community safer for all. We are using limited city resources more effectively for greater public safety.

As a city, we would be well served to remember that effective city policy requires avoiding simple slogans and unnecessary tradeoffs. We can root out racism in any form and ensure safety for all. As my examples demonstrate, these are not mutually exclusive goals.

Alter represents District 10 on the Austin City Council.