

HOLD COMO ACCOUNTABLE

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Statement on Columbia Police Department's Proposed Use of Flock ALPR Technology

Columbia, MO, Aug. 2, 2024 – The Columbia Police Department's proposed contract with Flock Safety and the public engagement process they have announced falls well short of the expectations we have made clear since Hold CoMo Accountable was founded. We have not only broad concerns about technologies like Automatic License Plate Readers (ALPRs) and their implications on civil liberties but also specific and more urgent concerns about Flock Safety, in particular. The Columbia City Council also needs to follow through on their unanimous vote on 11/21/22 to look at legislation similar to the ACLU's Citizens Control of Police Surveillance (CCOPS) model ordinance. Perhaps more pressingly, we all must also pause and consider the ways a system like this could be abused by nefarious actors in a political climate like we see in Missouri today; one where pregnant people and trans people are regularly scrutinized for the medical care they receive by powerful people such as our Attorney General, Andrew Bailey.

Legislation like CCOPS does not preempt the use of surveillance technology and we do not question the idea that policing will necessarily adopt new practices as technology advances. CCOPS does put necessary safeguards in place surrounding law enforcement's adoption and use of surveillance technology. Vitally, CCOPS calls for a robust public engagement process before adopting any surveillance technologies and specifically requires law enforcement to not only develop a plan to affirmatively address any negative impacts to civil liberties but also spell out exactly how and under what circumstances they will retain data or share it.

The data privacy concerns addressed by legislation such as CCOPS are especially applicable when it comes to Flock Safety. The ACLU notes that "Unlike a targeted ALPR camera system that is designed to take pictures of license plates, check the plates against local hot lists, and then flush the data if there's no hit, Flock is building a giant camera network that records people's comings and goings across the nation, and then makes that data available for search by any of its law enforcement customers." More simply put, there are plenty of other ALPR platforms available that do not have the same data privacy concerns that Flock Safety does.

How we move forward with adopting emerging technologies has always been important, but has recently become more pressing as we have seen attacks from our elected officials on pregnant and transgender bodies. Many politicians nationwide and in Missouri have made clear their intention to track anyone who leaves their state to seek reproductive or gender affirming healthcare. The recently passed sanctuary city ordinance here in Columbia specifically addresses this fear and calls on the Columbia Police Department to only share information such as what bathrooms people use when legally compelled to. With a system such as Flock Safety, one where the data on everyone, not just suspected criminals is stored not with the Columbia Police Department but with Flock Safety and possibly in some cases their private partners, even legislation like the sanctuary city ordinance could not protect bad actors from potentially obtaining that data warrantlessly.

Four of the Seven council members that voted to be presented with CCOPS or substantially similar legislation still sit on the city council. Mayor Barbara Buffaloe, 6th Ward Councilperson Betsy Peters, Fourth Ward Councilperson Nick Foster, and Third Ward Councilperson Roy Lovelady all voted to look at this legislation and nearly two years later there is no public indication that this has happened. Foster even indicated that he would have voted yes on adopting the FUSUS technology that was voted down at the same meeting if legislation such as CCOPS had been in place. Surely the same should apply to Flock Safety.

Join us in calling for the Columbia City Council to adopt CCOPS or substantially similar legislation and to vote no on adopting Flock Safety. Its more important than ever that members of the community take control of how and when we are surveilled and who can access that data. Everyone, but especially our trans community members, women and anyone else who may become pregnant deserves to have a government that is interested in protecting them, not persecuting them.

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