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emailed to
all

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am writing to all of you who participated in one or more of the three "Unity Meeting" sessions at the McCracken Courthouse. I want to summarize what we discussed and learned; and address where we go from here. I organized the meetings primarily in order to address one specific question: Is there racial bias in the Paducah Police Department and/or the McCracken County Sheriff's Department; and if there is, what can be done to eliminate it and the perception of it.

First, I want to thank all who gave their time and shared their thoughts in an open, honest, and civil manner. It is a tribute to our Community that a diverse group could come together in a joint effort to better our Community.

We hear claims of "systemic racism" in police departments across our nation. We learned that there is not systemic racism in our law enforcement departments locally. But we also discussed that, because of publicized events in the news (for example the George Floyd death) there is a perception of racism in the law enforcement community nationwide. The bad acts of officers in one location are attributed to law enforcement in general. It creates in some minds the perception that, although there is no evidence of it here, racism is associated with police everywhere.

We discussed what steps could be taken to address the perception of racism in our law enforcement community. Among the many ideas were: More pretesting of potential police hires; thorough background checks; requiring hiring of more black officers; requiring officers to live in the neighborhoods they work; body cameras; training regarding racial diversity; nonviolent tactics and de-escalation techniques; thorough reviews of police encounters, particularly in the use of force. We heard from Paducah Police Chief Laird and McCracken Sheriff Carter of their efforts to address the issues. We heard of the intensive background checks, psychological tests, use of force avoidance, de-escalation training, and body cameras. We heard of procedures for random reviews of police encounters and consistent and intense reviews of force encounters.

I think we all agreed on one major area where improvement can be made. There must be more positive association between the police and the black community. Historically, racism was systematic in our Country. We need not go back to the days of slavery to recognize that. Many people still recall living in a time of rampant racism and the resulting segregation of blacks and whites. "Whites Only" water fountains, theatres, restaurants, and much more. We have made a lot of progress. But the past is not easily forgotten. For many, both black and white, it lives on still. We cannot forget that it was the police who were required to enforce the Jim Crow laws. Today, law prohibits the prior systemic racism in our nation, but individuals' memories and resulting feelings are not easily erased. Given this history, not so long ago, is it surprising that black folks do not trust, and perhaps even fear, the police?

We don't trust what we don't know. Including people. If we get to know each other, we can develop a trust of each other. I am convinced that trust is the answer in police and black community relations. The police need to get to know the black folks in the community. The black folks need to get to know their police officers. A black mother told me this: "White mommas tell their children to go to the police if they have trouble; black mommas tell their children don't go to the police or you'll get in trouble". Let that sink in. Is that true? Not in our Community. Is it a popular perception? Yes. And in our Community.

If the police and the black community develop a trusting relationship, we can eliminate the idea among many that the police are to be feared. We can instill the idea that the police are there for our protection and help, regardless of our color.

How do we instill a positive relationship? By actions. Not by talk. We can be told something all day long. But if we are shown, and consistently shown, we believe. The law enforcement community must take the lead. They are the government; they are sworn to serve and protect. They must demonstrate that they are there to serve all of the Community. The Chief and the Sheriff know this. They have programs instituted to do so. Community outreach programs, neighborhood interaction programs. Various procedural institutions designed to better relationships are implemented. But it is the individual officer that makes or breaks it. Programs are great concepts. But success depends on people who act because of a desire to better themselves and their community, not because of a requirement that they follow a mandate.

Is it all one-sided? Can the police alone solve the problem? Obviously not. It requires a community-wide effort from everyone, regardless of vocation, color, or beliefs. We can do this together. Let's get our own community, our "house in order". One of our participants stated that all he and the black community want is to be treated fairly. Surely we can do that, whether we are police or private citizens.

As stated above, the mission of the Unity Meetings was to assess whether there was racism in the police department and sheriff's department. In addressing that narrow question however, I am convinced that we discovered how we (the entire community) can address the perception of racism throughout the County and City, not just within law enforcement. It is really simple. We get to know each other. How? We demonstrate through our actions and attitudes that we accept all people. Furthermore, white people can go to predominantly black people events or places. Black people go to predominantly white gatherings. A participant cited Dr. King as saying that Sunday is the most segregated day of the week. Blacks in "black churches" and whites in "white churches"; some exceptions of course.

We have had our meetings. We have raised concerns and raised solutions. We have talked the talk, now it's time to walk the walk. (Sure that's corny but isn't it true). I don't see a need for me to continue the discussion when we know what to do. I am glad to participate in any meetings, gatherings, whatever. But it is time for the citizens of the community to take over. It's time for action, not talk. The Eighth of August is upon us. It will be a great opportunity for celebration, regardless of skin color.

I have been watching closely in McCracken County. I hope that it is not only wishful thinking; but I believe that as I have been out in our Community the last few weeks I have sensed a greater frequency of black folks and white folks exchanging a smile and a greeting as they pass. If true, I concede it is not a leap of progress. But it's a start. It's a first step. And we don't move forward if we don't start.

Sincerely,



Craig Z. Clymer
McCracken County Judge Executive

CZC: vp