

Chiefs' Statement Regarding Race Data Collection
April 2, 2012

Joint statement of:

Chief Steve McQueen, Winooski Police Department
Chief Michael Schirling, Burlington Police Department
Chief Lianne Tuomey, University of Vermont Police Services
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We are pleased today to be part of the continued evolution of law enforcement operations and community partnership in Vermont, with the release of the second Race Data Collection report for traffic stop data across four Chittenden County Police agencies. As you may know, this is work that has been recognized by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) as award-winning, culminating in the presentation of the IACP Civil Rights Award in the multi-agency category in October 2011.

Today marks another key point in a five-year journey involving many community stakeholders who have sought to build on the solid foundation of our efforts to foster mutual trust between the community and law enforcement officers. There are many who have expended much effort to bring the partnership this far. Among them:

- Dr. Stephanie Seguino, Dr. Nancy Brooks, and Kyle Mitofsky who have volunteered their expertise and done extensive and exemplary work during the analysis process.
- The Members, past and present, of the Uncommon Alliance Steering Committee.
- The countless community members who have attended and actively participated in Uncommon Alliance meetings and community discussions over the past four years.
- Our many criminal justice partners.
- All of the police officers and support personnel who have worked to collect data in their daily work and who work tirelessly each day to keep our communities and all members of our communities, safe.

Our message today largely echoes our message from 15 months ago. Today, however, we have more robust data from which to work.

As we have consistently stated, the issue of race disparity in our country is one filled with passion, emotion, and extensive and often tragic history. Embedded within that history are images and stories of police, the enforcement arm of government, and the entire criminal justice system being used as a direct instrumentality of racism and bias. Those images exist in stark contrast to basic values of the justice system that we strive every day to uphold. Sadly, this history tarnished the integrity of these critical institutions, which exist to translate the ideal of equality before the law into practice.

Equally as consistent is the level of performance and service to the community by the award-winning officers and staff that are the backbone of the Departments doing this critical work.

Today, recognizing that disparity continues to exist in the criminal justice system at all levels, we are committed to working tirelessly to both learn and distance ourselves from those historic events, to grow as a community, as organizations, and as individuals. Today the manner in which law enforcement operates in Vermont bears little resemblance to that history. Our challenge lies in educating all members of the justice system, identifying and correcting biases, and fulfilling our commitment to the values of justice, fairness, and public safety, and to robustly address disparate treatment when and where it exists. Without this fundamental commitment, we risk eroding the very foundations of due process and the rule of law that we stand for.

Among our key roles, and the one highlighted today, is to mitigate the impact of those biases in law enforcement operations and in the criminal justice system as a whole. Bias in law enforcement and criminal justice not only adversely impacts those who bias is exerted on, sometimes by dehumanizing them, but erodes the effectiveness of the criminal justice system by distracting resources from real problems.

The data analysis report released today is an important step in that process – in the evolution of our respective law enforcement organizations, the Uncommon Alliance, and policing in Vermont. It is, however, just one small piece of a large and complex puzzle. Policing our communities without bias requires many things including;

- Good hiring practices that involve community stakeholders and are reflective of our shared values
- Effective, ongoing training at all levels of the criminal justice system
- Thoughtful policy development
- Bold and effective leadership and supervision
- Community partnerships like the Uncommon Alliance and others, which enhance accountability to the community
- An accessible and effective complaint and review process
- And the collection and analysis of data – as demonstrated here

The report released today highlights something that we have long known – that disparity along racial lines exists in the way the criminal justice system, and many other systems, operate.

This data collection project represents not only an effort at trust building, but as important, the implementation of a learning tool for law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement in the 21st century is complex and complicated, and concern regarding bias in policing is one of many daily challenges we face. The increasing level of complexity, particularly in proactive law enforcement operations that are so critical to detecting crime and ensuring community safety, must achieve balance. Balance in mitigating the impact of bias in our operations but also balance in ensuring that the issue of bias and profiling is not used improperly, and in ensuring that our officers and staff have the support and confidence that they so richly deserve in carrying out their daily work. It is important to recognize but not overemphasize that there are those who use this issue as a means to attempt to intimidate officers from doing their job. We must continue to work toward meaningful solutions to all of these issues through building meaningful relationship and trust with the community.

This tool will continue to help inform our future conversations, shape our continued efforts, and help guide us to the next step in the important process of mitigating bias in policing. It is an opportunity to renew our collective commitment to continue to work together as a community on this important topic. The end goal is simple – to shift the thought process from one where law enforcement is sometimes seen as an instrument of bias to one where law enforcement is seen as the leader in protecting our communities from bias.

You have our sincere commitment to continuing this work with the Uncommon Alliance, community members and leaders, and within our own law enforcement organizations – each rich with a dedicated staff of professional law enforcement officers, dispatchers, and support staff working each day to protect our communities and deliver world-class service – to ensure that our communities are safe, livable, and free from bias for all those who live, work, and visit them.