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Subject: police accountability

This is the full version of the testimony I wanted to give to the legislative committee on police reform. I had to pare it down to two minutes, so my testimony was much shorter.

I started my work with the police and probation and parole in the mid-90s at United Counseling Service where I started and anger management group. At first I thought that people I was seeing were exaggerating their stories about how they were treated by the police. I came into this work a bit naïve and believing in our police force and in our criminal justice system. After so many similar stories of mistreatment and just being railroaded through the system as soon as possible I began to recognize a clearly systemic issue. The most disturbing thing about this is that I had no place to go to report what I was observing. It was obvious to me that there was no accountability. All of the people that were having the difficulties with the police and the criminal justice system all have mental health problems. They are all on Medicaid so therefore by definition they are all in the lowest social economic status.

A Great spiritual leader was believed to have said “how you treat the least among you is how you treat me.”

I became embarrassed about how people I was working with were being treated by the system. After all, the system is the state, the **state** police the **states** attorney my client versus **the state**. Who is the state? This is supposed to be a democracy which means I am part of the state. I am a citizen of the state and I am ashamed of what is done in my name.

When I think of the ethical code I am required to follow because of the trust that is put in me and my requirement by law, to let everyone know who comes to see me that if they are unhappy with my work, how to file a complaint with the state licensing board, contrast that with the total lack of accountability for the police and nowhere to really turn if you have a complaint as the current internal affairs system is kept confidential and has every appearance of a white wash. There is no feedback no resolution of the complaint, it's a dead end. This is despite the fact that the police have far, far more power over people than I do.

Given what we know from the famous Stamford study about the tendency for human beings when given such power to abuse it, it's an outrage that we really have no accountability when that power is abused.

After the Bennington Police Department was studied by the well-respected International Association of Chiefs of Police, one of the recommendations is the formation of a citizen's oversight panel. If it is recommended for the Bennington Police Department why is it not a good idea for the state police. It would seem wise to have a citizen's oversight panel for each local state police barracks consisting of citizens from that region.

In my work in mental health, one of our goals is to give people a sense of empowerment. They currently have no empowerment when it comes to having been mistreated, or disrespected by the police. It would be very helpful when someone has a complaint if I had a place to help them take the complaint.

It would be very helpful for local police captains to be made aware if there are frequent complaints about a particular officer, as was the case with the officer that killed George Floyd, then that Capt. would know that he has a problem with which he has to deal. We don't want a tragedy like that to happen in our state.

To give you some examples of the kinds of complaints that I have heard recently: one of my patients had had a warrant out for his arrest because he had missed a court date of which he was not aware. He went to court and got the matter taken care of so the warrant was no longer valid. Not long after he was stopped by the police who when they found out that there was a warrant for his arrest he was immediately arrested and put in the back of a police car he explained to the officer that he had the paperwork in his glove compartment proving that the warrant was no longer valid. The officer refused to listen. Fortunately for my patient when the officer was passing this person off to a sheriff to have him taken to the Marble Valley correctional facility, that Sheriff happen to have been in court when that warrant was taken care of. So the sheriff then unhandcuffed him and let him go. I wonder how much of my taxpaying dollars was spent on having that Sheriff meet because the officer wouldn't listen. Failing to listen to people is one of the most frequent complaints I have heard in my over 20 years of working with people with mental illness. Good police officers treat people with respect regardless of the circumstances. I was told that by a good police officer.

I worked with a teenager who had numerous special needs, but not the kind that is easily recognizable when you talk to him. He made some mistakes as a juvenile and got in trouble with the law. I worked with him for over a year and helped him turn his life around. I felt he had made major progress and treatment was no longer needed. The police however had a different opinion and continued to threaten and harass him. He was charged with grand larceny on extremely thin evidence. Living in constant fear of the police and of going to jail, it finally got the best of him and at the age of 19 his mother came into his room and found out he had hung himself.

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