

*Building a Better System of Public Safety for Saint Paul:*

*A Reflection on Our Work*

By: Sami Banat

Over the past few months I have had the honor of serving on Mayor Carter's Community First Public Safety Commission, a group charged with the task of reforming how the City of Saint Paul responds to Priority 4 and 5 calls. Priority 4 and 5 calls for service are categorized as non-urgent, non-violent calls. Examples include noise complaints, vehicle violations, general assistance, etc. The work is no easy feat, and as Mayor Carter put it, the commission was given the effort of reforming public safety in an impossible amount of time. I write this reflection after completing our final meeting ahead of a vote on the recommendations package. In this paper, I will describe what led to this moment, Mayor Carter's broader plan of 'Community First Public Safety' in Saint Paul, my own experience working in this space, and what the future holds for our city.

Unprecedented national outrage in response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 has forced city leaders to take serious looks at how public safety operates within their jurisdictions. The Minneapolis City Council, which made a powerful statement in its pledge to 'defund the police department' in June of 2020 fell to the challenge and backed down, blaming one another for having different interpretations of what 'defund' really meant. Originally seen as taking a brave, bold step by activists nationwide, the council is now seen as a collection of do-nothings, who could not meet the moment. Mayor Frey's refusal to take action, paired with the City Council's

wishy-washy response has left activists and residents alike in Minneapolis discouraged. Across the river, Saint Paul took a more steady and methodical approach.

Though Mayor Carter had already been working on his broader ‘Community First Public Safety’ framework before the wave of police reform movements began this past summer, he only expanded on it recently to meet the moment. Carter, a black mayor whose father was a police officer, offered a unique and important perspective to the issue. The landmark public safety plan for Saint Paul offered a wide reaching view of what public safety actually is. The plan, being broad in its reach, includes many facets, such as: the elimination of library fees, to lighting the streets up, to ensuring children have access to education, and minimum wage increases. To Mayor Carter, public safety meant addressing root causes of crime rather than only punishing. The work would be put on hold in late summer however, as the city dealt with a wave of violence and issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. There was opposition from more conservative voices in the city, such as Councilmember Jane Prince, who admonished the plan saying, “I have not seen a prior administration that has been so remote from the council in terms of the budget and in terms of a major initiative like this.” However, the hard work moved forward, and Mayor Carter added the new initiative of identifying alternative responses to Priority 4 and 5 calls for service through a commission to be formed.

I got a call from the Mayor’s office in November and was told Mayor Carter was going to invite me to serve on his new commission. I had gotten to know Mayor Carter over the last few years through my role as an executive committee member of the Saint Paul DFL, and work on a number of a local campaigns, including the 2019 Trash Referendum and 2018 SPPS Bond

Referendum Campaign, where I worked closely with the Mayor's office. I was honored to be asked to serve and accepted. Launched in November, the commission started meeting bi-weekly to address Priority 4 and 5 911 calls for public service. These calls are characterized as non-violent and non-urgent and to Mayor Carter, it was a perfect place to start shifting responsibility for certain things away from police and towards other trained individuals. The commission of 48 members portrayed a wide range of stakeholders in Saint Paul. Community leaders to business leaders, elected officials to city departments, organizers, students, etc. I could go on and on about the diversity in lived experiences represented on the commission, but about halfway through the process, I felt some discouragement. Voices of people keen on keeping the system as is, namely the police officers on the commission, seemed to have been dominating conversations. In response, I organized a group of folks I knew felt the system had to change dramatically, and started organizing within the subgroup to create a game plan moving forward. From that point onward, we were able to push the commission in the right direction, that is towards actual public safety reform.

Currently, recommendations are being finalized for presentation to the Mayor's Office and eventually the City Council for approval. It appears likely that there will be substantial reform to Priority 4 and 5 calls, with short term reform seeing an unarmed, non-police response, and expansion of mental health professionals and city employees to respond to such non-violent calls for service. Long term reform could see the creation of a 'Department of Neighborhood Safety.' Though it is still a plan in the works, such a department would focus on prevention of crime by addressing root causes such as systemic inequity, lack of access to education, and poverty. In the end, the commission was given a pretty narrow charge in a much broader idea of public safety,

and is now set on actually accomplishing some major reform in Saint Paul pending council approval.

Ahead of the commission's final meeting, Daunte Wright was murdered. Our commission's charge was specifically along the lines of Priority 4 and 5 calls, but after consulting with key partners in the work such as CM Jalali and Dr. Rivera, as well as the sub-group we organized, I believed it was necessary to look beyond our charge and after doing some research on traffic stop data, we drafted a memorandum that asked the commission to include a recommendation for the SPPD to cease traffic stops, especially pretextual traffic stops immediately, except in the case of flagrant moving violations. Pretextual traffic stops are situations where a vehicle is pulled over for an incredibly minor violation such as something hanging on a mirror, for the purpose to search the vehicle and trick drivers into admitting to other violations. Beyond being constitutionally questionable, the practice targets black drivers disproportionately and often results in escalation and violence from officers.

Another interesting piece of the data was that while black drivers are more likely to be pulled over and have their vehicles searched, white drivers being pulled over are more likely to result in citations. An explanation of this goes along with what was said on black drivers being targeted for pretextual stops: when a white driver gets pulled over it is more likely to be for an actual violation of traffic law resulting in a misdemeanor, but when a black driver is pulled over, it is more often for no violation that can result in a citation, but rather a means to search the vehicle without probable cause. This data emphasized the need for an end of pretextual traffic stops, and led to a number of members signing on to the memorandum, which we presented at the final

commission meeting. Appearing to have strong support, we are now in a period of waiting for a final vote on the recommendations package before sending it along to the City Council and Mayor's office.

Despite the official meetings of the commission now coming to an end, there is still work to be done. I will be working with Mayor Carter's office to finalize the recommendations coming out of the commission and to be a part of the process presenting them to the city council where the reforms will need approval. With the extra recommendation on traffic stops, I am currently working with Ramsey County Commission Chair Carter and County Attorney Choi to see how we can affect change within the broader locale of Ramsey County on traffic stops. Both public officials are keen on implementing reform along those lines, and our recommendation has spurred the conversations we are currently having on how to make that happen.

Looking forward, I am hopeful for positive change in our city. I am excited to work to ensure the final set of recommendations that come out of this commission are approved by the city council and that implementation results in good. I also look forward to continuing the work we started on traffic stops. This work is far from over and Mayor Carter's wide ranging vision of Community First Public Safety is something to be proud of as a city. Saint Paul took the initiative to be among the first cities in the nation making substantive change to its public safety system, and will continue to be a model for other cities across the country to follow. Saint Paul needs to continue its course of understanding important issues holistically -- knowing that the issue of public safety has roots in poverty and education and housing and zoning and so many other urban issues. We know that crime is not random, that it is born out of necessity and that to

fully tackle these issues we have to ensure that all residents' basic needs are met. I am proud to have been a part of this work and am excited for what is next.

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