

National Stacy M. Brown

# What Defunding Police Departments Means



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**\*\*FILE\*\*** Police officers from the Montgomery County's 2nd District take a knee with protesters during a peaceful demonstration against racism and police brutality in Bethesda on June 2. (Brigette Squire/The Washington Informer)

On Friday, the Minneapolis City Council started a process that would eliminate the city's police department as a charter department and create a new public safety organization.

The council also added a resolution to create the process allowing city staff to take steps toward developing what they call a "transformative new model" for public safety.

According to MPR News in Minneapolis, the city is required to fund a police department under the charter.

Still, if voters favor excising the police department from the charter, the council could then abolish it. A majority of council members have said they favor dismantling the police department.

Lawmakers in other jurisdictions around the nation have also discussed or have moved to defund police departments. For many, such action begs the question: What does defunding the police department mean?

“Defunding the police is about the process of community involvement and reimagining the purpose of police, which leads to a different outcome,” activist Na’ilah Amaru said in an email to The Informer. “The phrase challenges American society to see fully the harm inflicted on Black and brown communities by current policies and practices that invest in a militarized police force while deliberately neglecting the needs, and divesting critical resources from communities of color.”

Traditionally, Americans equate the police with public safety. Still, police brutality and the disproportionate number of deaths of African-Americans at the hand of police demonstrate all-too powerfully that is not equally true for all segments of society, said Nora V. Demleitner, a Roy L. Steinheimer Jr. Professor of Law at Washington and Lee University in Virginia.

Overpolicing of African-American neighborhoods, exploitative tactics, stop-and-frisk abuses, and police brutality up to the murders of African-Americans show that the state’s power unequally — and sometimes brutally — falls upon a small and disenfranchised group in our population, Demleitner said.

“African-Americans as a group was historically enslaved, then suffered during segregation, and continue to be treated unequally in every walk of life, as health, education and wealth inequities powerfully demonstrate,” she said. “Let’s also acknowledge that police encounters, even if not themselves violent, often bring an unequal and overly punitive criminal

justice response on minority communities, which creates further reluctance to rely upon the police. None of this is conducive to public safety.

“Defunding and even abolishing the police was discussed in passing during the 1960s as was prison abolition,” Demleitner said. “Those terms aren’t the same as lawlessness. It is about paring police functions back to their core. Police should be narrowly focused on law enforcement, especially as they carry weapons and should be subject to robust constraints on their power and vibrant oversight and accountability.

Discussions began last week about whether school resource officers (SROs) are necessary in Prince George’s County public schools.

The school seeks to remove those officers from school buildings and amend the budget already passed by County Council to use \$5 million to hire more mental health professionals, social workers, and counselors.

Even if the school board approved to no longer have SROs, a Maryland law adopted in 2018 requires all school systems to provide adequate “law enforcement coverage.”

Each school system must report any life-threatening incidents on school grounds, hire a school safety coordinator, and assess students’ behavioral and mental health services.

County Executive Angela Alsobrooks said she understands the need to provide more mental health services for students, but they also deserve to be safe.

“Our children ... our teachers, our administrators, and any other person in those school buildings deserve as much as we can offer them,” she said. “I don’t believe in withdrawing school resource officers would be in the best interest of our students, our teachers, administrators. [Students] deserve to be safe and secure and to have those other services that are suggested.”

The police are increasingly tasked to be engaged in all kinds of problem-solving. In resolving issues, other entities can do better, added Demleitner,

who is also a chaired law professor and lead author of the casebook on Sentencing Law and Policy.

Mental health counselors, not armed police, should be sent when someone has a psychotic break, and teachers and principals, not armed police, should resolve school disputes, Demleitner said.

“Traffic accidents don’t require armed police. And certainly directing traffic doesn’t demand armed police,” the professor said. “We can allocate all those tasks to where they should belong and fund those entities with the resources currently allocated to the police. Public safety would not be harmed, but the footprint of our criminal legal system would shrink dramatically. That would be a salutary development.”

Demleitner noted that an additional component is the militarization of police. Police departments have generously benefited from federal grants to buy military-style equipment, some of which are now used against peaceful protesters.

Removing these funds is a vital aspect of defunding, Demleitner said.

“Calls to defund the police are about re-allocating resources, about shifting the focus off of criminal enforcement toward greater equality and welfare for all,” she said.

*WI staff writer William Ford contributed to this story.*

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