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Task Force on Policing and Communities of Color releases 2021 report
Reconvened in 2020, the task force analyzed data and progress to further improve community-police relations in Centre Region

State College, Pa – The recently reconvened town-gown Task Force on Policing and Communities of Color, comprised of Penn State and local community leaders, released its 2021 report today (July 6), noting among its recommendations that the task force should remain active to serve as a support and monitoring structure for carrying out its new recommendations.

Over the past eight months, the task force assessed data, procedures and practices from local law enforcement agencies that could contribute to bias; studied where University and local police departments have made progress since the task force's initial report and recommendations in 2016; identified where more progress is needed; and crafted a report that provides new recommendations for improving the relationships among law enforcement and racially and ethnically minoritized groups. The data collected from participating policing units included information on police contacts, use of force, calls for service, arrest statistics, complaints and employment demographics.

The Task Force on Policing and Communities of Color was reconvened at the request of Penn State President Eric J. Barron to include additional law enforcement agencies within Centre County. The initial task force in 2015 only looked at State College Police Department (SCPD) and University Police and Public Safety (UPPS). This most recent task force survey includes not only SCPD and UPPS, but also the Bellefonte Police Department, Ferguson Township Police Department, Patton Township Police Department and Spring Township Police Department.

"I am incredibly thankful for the work of this task force because as an institution of higher education, it is our duty to drive change while addressing issues of racism, bias, ignorance and intolerance," said Barron. "Penn State is committed to developing key recommendations as we look to foster collaborative working relationships with surrounding police departments, address immediate issues and provide long-term solutions."

Emil L. Cunningham, task force chair and director for the office of diversity and inclusion for Penn State Finance and Business, expressed that by looking back at the 2016 report, and including the rise in civil unrest across the nation and questions of racial inequities in policing, the task force was able to ask, "what more should be done?"

"The task force is aiming to push progress and action," said Cunningham. "The time has come for greater action and transparency with our communities. It is our duty, as neighbors,

coworkers and community members to do the right thing. We must work toward more equitable practices."

Task force recommendations

Based on the task force's findings, the 2021 report recommends that local law enforcement:

- **Examine reported data and reporting practices more thoroughly:** To better understand the local data gathered, the task force recommends hiring external consultants for deeper study. The task force indicates a need to further analyze perceptions of police-community relations, particularly looking at how minoritized communities perceive police. The task force also recommends examination of the working relationship among local police agencies and UPPS during large events; study departmental case processing; and evaluate potential racial and ethnic disparities;

- **Diversify police departments:** While the task force acknowledges that more police officers of color does not necessarily translate into a more inclusive police department, representation matters and progress has been slow. The task force identifies a lack of diversity among the examined law enforcement units and recommends cluster hiring, actively recruiting diverse individuals, hiring a diversity officer and implementing mentorship programs;

- **Create consistency among data collection/reporting practices:** In order to better track, monitor and transparently report data from local policing agencies, the task force recommends creating consistent data collection methods; analyzing data on a quarterly basis; conducting a more comprehensive annual analysis of data; and partnering with Penn State's Office of Planning, Assessment and Institutional Research (OPAIR) for assistance with data analysis. The task force noted the difficulties in comparing data among the departments due to differing methods and categories of data collection;

- **Provide training tailored to community needs:** To address local concerns, the task force recommends the participating policing agencies provide officers with training in various specializations and continue offering professional development opportunities; and

- **Continue and expand community engagement efforts:** The task force expressed the need for local police departments to build on and expand efforts for community engagement, such as implementing annual service hours for all officers.

Progress since 2016

The Task Force on Policing and Communities of Color was first organized in 2015 as part of [Penn State's ongoing efforts](#) to combat racism, address bias and enhance community safety. The 2016 task force included representation from a range of community partners including Penn State administrators, faculty, students and staff; SCPD; and the Chamber of Business and Industry of Centre County.

Since the [2016 report](#), the task force found that SCPD and UPPS — the two departments that participated in the task force's first examination and received recommendations -- have

employed various strategies to improve their relationships with communities of color, along with their operations as a policing unit.

The departments extended their networking efforts and collaborations with local organizations, student groups and businesses; increased recruitment efforts through outreach and improved recruitment materials to better reflect communities of color; introduced mandated officer trainings, including diversity, mental health and mental disability trainings; provided community training including education on civilian rights; participated in Campus Community Unity meetings, Special Olympics and more; and continued publishing data online related to police and community interactions.

Additionally, UPPS, which is housed organizationally within Penn State Finance and Business, implemented its [Accountability and Transparency Initiative](), which includes a comprehensive [public-facing website]() listing accomplishments and relevant data, and also launched a body-worn camera program in [May 2021](), to reinforce accountability and help build trust among citizens and police officers, fulfilling a University commitment.

"All of the recent initiatives being undertaken by University Police and Public Safety are part of our focus on enhancing community policing and responding to community needs," said Sara Thorndike, senior vice president for Finance and Business/Treasurer and co-executive sponsor of the reconvened task force. "The ongoing work of the task force and the implementation of programs in response to the findings highlight Penn State's desire for even greater partnership in policing operations. We are taking critical steps to further an environment of trust among our communities of color and beyond."

Moving Forward

The report noted that while other local policing agencies were not part of the initial 2016 report, several have nonetheless launched efforts to improve their relationships with communities of color and volunteered their data to the task force. For the 2021 report, four additional policing agencies —Ferguson Township (Chris Albright, chief of police); Spring Township (Shane Dickey, officer in charge); Patton Township (Tyler Jolley, chief of police); and Bellefonte (Shawn Weaver, chief of police) — supplied data and helped to develop the new recommendations. Representing SCPD and UPPS, respectively, for the 2021 report were John Gardner, chief of police, and Joseph Milek, chief of police operations.

Cunningham said local police departments and Penn State should work together to take a more strategic approach to data analysis and community engagement. Cunningham also said all organizations should begin prioritizing efforts that can be accomplished in the near term, such as improving data collection, as well as planning for longer-term goals, such as hiring and recruiting more diverse officers.

"I want to thank all the members of the task force who dedicated their time and expertise to develop these important recommendations," said Tom Fountaine, State College Borough manager and co-executive sponsor of the reconvened task force. "The borough and the State College Police Department look forward to working with Penn State, other police departments, and our communities of color in Centre County to continue implementing a wide range of strategies to improve the relationship with the underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities

within the State College community. We are fortunate to have passionate staff, Penn State faculty, staff and students, and community members engaged to help us accomplish this goal."

Centrice Martin, assistant township manager for Ferguson Township, said that her township is currently in an agreement process with the Borough of Bellefonte and the Borough of State College to launch the Centre County Human Relations Commission, which would advocate and promote equality of opportunity in the areas such as housing, fair employment practices and governmental services.

"The Ferguson Township Board of Supervisors adopted several proclamations committing the township to social equity and inclusion, condemning acts of racially motivated hate and bias, and celebrating the diversity of our community," said Martin.

Martin also said that local police departments in the Centre Region, including Ferguson Township, have implemented a shared Police Records Management System, which supports a common database and allows for data collection, tracking and reporting to become standardized across the region.

Cunningham said the efforts for streamlined data across all local police departments are intended to simplify analysis and mitigate challenges, such as ambiguity, when determining whether potential implicit bias exists in local policing.

Like in many parts of the United States, the 2021 task force report's data showed that the frequency of arrests and use of force by police were disproportionately higher among the Black community compared to the group's population size in Centre County and the surrounding areas. Additionally, the report's data indicated that the number of arrests and use of force rates were the highest among whites, as whites are the largest population in the area. Ultimately, the task force agreed inspection by external consultants and streamlining data among all units will be necessary for consideration of further action.

According to Cunningham, the task force is currently working on establishing membership for the next iteration with the aim to meet on a regular cadence throughout the year to analyze progress, provide resources to all the local police departments and assist with the implementation of recommendations.

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