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Six years ago, four separate police killings of African-Americans grabbed our nation's attention: Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Eric Garner in New York, Michael Brown in Ferguson and Tamir Rice in Cleveland. This year, Breonna Taylor in Louisville and George Floyd in Minneapolis were killed at the hands of the police, and Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia, was chased down and murdered for jogging while black only to have the local prosecutor give an early indication of no crime. What happened to each of these fellow Americans is horrific and reveals an ugly side of life in America. The anger following these recent deaths is understandable and a repeat of the anger of 2014. I hoped that law enforcement had learned from 2014 and progressed. Clearly, not all of them have or care to.

I am disgusted by the sight of a sworn police officer in Minneapolis kneeling on the neck and choking the life out of George Floyd as he lay on the ground, handcuffed and helpless, begging for his life. There is no known police technique that I am aware of that justifies Officer Chauvin holding his knee on the neck of Mr. Floyd and ignoring his distress calls. The other officers on the scene who stood by and refused to come to the aid of Mr. Floyd and restrain Officer Chauvin must be held criminally responsible for intentionally violating their oath and allowing Officer Chauvin to take the life of Mr. Floyd. Instead, they chose to protect Officer Chauvin.

I recognize the anger of many Americans over these appalling deaths and we as a nation need to recognize that the protests represent more than anger and frustration but also a demand for change. We have seen and heard it before and we are going to see it again and again until we make fundamental changes.

Peaceful marches, sit-ins and civil disobedience should be expected and may be our responsibility following these events. Our nation was forged on protest - the raising of voices and fists by those who were not heard. We should expect no less today, but let's do it in a way that is loud but peaceful, thoughtful, urgent, inclusive and long-term.

There are many factors that have contributed to the racial chasm that exists in our nation. If we focus on a few, starting with education and justice, maybe we can send out a ripple of hope and the idea of American exceptionalism will become a little more real for every American.

Equal opportunity starts with equal education. How are we funding education, early childhood development and support, mental health and substance use disorder? America is angry at the lack of equal school funding and the lack of opportunity that follows. Children who grow up and go to school on the north shore of Chicago get a very different education than kids in Auburn Gresham. Lincoln Park and Washington Park may as well be two different countries. Although Naperville and Aurora share a border they are very different communities. The General Assembly must equalize school funding and classroom sizes across our state so children in Chicago, the suburbs, central Illinois and southern Illinois receive a similar education. Children in some parts of Illinois play on multi-million dollar athletic fields while kids in the Austin neighborhood worry about getting safely to and from school.

The relationship between police and the community has to evolve. My experience prosecuting Jason Van Dyke and my 10 years as the chief law enforcement officer and prosecutor in one of the largest counties in Illinois taught me two primary things that must change in America to improve the relationship between police and those they serve: First, change the standard that allows an officer to legally use deadly force from one based on "reasonable belief" of imminent danger to one in which it is "necessary." Second, use-of-force policies and trainings should require officers to use force only when there is an imminent threat of death or serious injury (to themselves or others) and to use the least amount of force necessary, and train officers and impose a legal duty to intervene when a colleague may be on the brink of or is using excessive force. This should be standard practice, but making it the law with consequences will reduce the likelihood that those who do step in will face backlash from fellow officers.

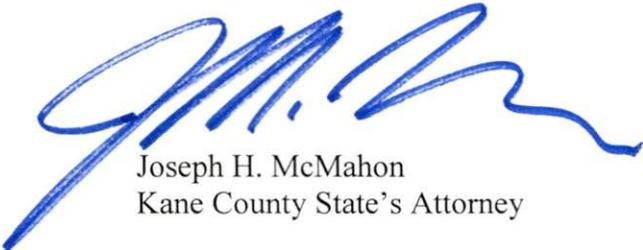
Our system of justice must recognize where it has fallen down with inconsistencies in charges, prosecutions and sentences, in addressing police misconduct, and how these mixed messages are received by the public. How police and prosecutors charge and how the judicial system resolves cases and sentences defendants varies greatly across the state. Similarly, too often when a police officer commits egregious misconduct there are no consequences and after a period of suspension or termination is re-instated by an arbitration system that is unaccountable. Accuracy and consistency in criminal justice creates confidence in the promise of equal rights and protection.

It is time for all of us to wake up and do something about school funding, job creation and economic opportunity, and the fundamental fairness in the pillars of a civilized society so every child has the opportunity to go to a school that is properly funded, has access to stable and affordable housing, economic opportunity, and a fair chance to reach their potential, so children in marginalized communities are more likely to pick up a book and get a job than be exposed to a gun and the cycle of violence.

I, like many across Kane County and our nation, ask myself if I have contributed to the discord. Have I done my part to strengthen the fabric of America? What have I learned since 2014, the Rodney King beating in 1991 and the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s? We have made some progress but we can do better.

For more information about what we can do to change the dynamic between the police and our communities I have included a link produced by the Leadership Conference on Civil & Human Rights with a toolkit on a Guide to Fair, Safe and Effective Community Policing.

Policing.civilrights.org



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