

# MINUTES

## PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE MEETING

5:30 P. M., MAY 28, 2021

Keeley Steele, Chairperson, called the meeting of the Charleston City Council Committee on Public Safety to order at 5:30 p.m., MAY 28, 2021 in the AV Room at City Hall, and was made available as a live stream via CivicClerk per the agenda.

### **Committee Members Present:**

Keeley Steele, Chair  
Chuck Overstreet, Vice Chair  
Pat Jones  
Bruce King  
Deanna McKinney  
Shannon Snodgrass (via Zoom)  
Tiffany Wesley-Plear

### **Other Councilmembers Present:**

1. Approval of Previous Minutes –  
Councilmember King moved to approve the minutes of the previous meeting on 3-30-2021. Councilmember Jones seconded the motion. There was no objection, and the minutes were approved.

## 2. Public Speakers –

- Dijon Stokes – Spoke against Resolution No. 472-21
- Loree Stark – Spoke against Resolution No. 472-21
- Chad Cordell – Spoke against Resolution No. 472-21
- Takeiya Smith - Spoke against Resolution No. 472-21
- Lill Properino – submitted a written statement, read by the Chair, against Resolution No. 472-21
- Liira Raines - submitted a written statement, read by the Chair, against Resolution No. 472-21

3. Resolution No. 472-21 - Authorizing the Mayor or City Manager to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Kanawha County Board of Education for continued placement of three Prevention Resource Officers at schools in Charleston – West Side Middle School, Capital High School and George Washington High School.

Councilmembers Steele invited Keith Beneteau, Executive Director of Safety and Security Services for Kanawha County Schools District, to give the Committee an overview of the Prevention Resource Officers Program. Beneteau stated that the difference between PROs and SROs is that the former is grant funded. The Officers are stationed in the schools, of which there are currently 11 assigned in all 8 high schools and 3 middle schools (West Side, South Charleston and Dunbar). In order to be grant funded, an MOU must be signed with the Division and Community and Justice Services. Beneteau added that, generally speaking, PROs are in place for prevention, mentoring, bring a positive role model. They are not necessarily there to enforce school rules (which is the burden of the school administrators), but can if they witness or are alerted to a crime. However, they are aware that school discipline is the preferred route. The school administration and the PROs work together as a team to provide for the safety and security of the schools. He added that they provide a level of comfort and reduce anxiety, know the school climate and how it operates. Beneteau added that he considers them indispensable, and they have a sense of duty, ethical responsibility, ownership and respect.

Councilmember Steele asked why a municipality would not apply for a grant that would partially cover the salary. Beneteau replied that he has heard anecdotally that the contract required would limit their ability to otherwise task that officer (they are required to spend 35 hours a week in the school).

Councilmember McKinney asked if the PROs and SROs had different sets of responsibilities. Beneteau replied that they are called PROs if grant funded. Councilmember McKinney expressed concerns that they were being used to put children through the legal system. Councilmember McKinney asked who held the PROs accountable. Councilmember Steele replied that they are required to make daily,

monthly and quarterly reports. Councilmember King asked if the duties for PROs and SROs are the same. Beneteau replied that the only MOUs that are signed are with PROs

Councilmember Snodgrass added that her father is a retired former Superintendent of Kanawha County Schools. She had spoken to several teachers and students, and had not heard any negative comments regarding the PROs. She asked if there had been any negative outcomes with the officers. Beneteau replied that they are extremely rare, perhaps once or twice a year. Most were not egregious, and were usually the result of personality conflicts. The school system does not have direct supervisory control of the PROs, so complaints would most likely go to those individual agencies instead of the school district.

Councilmember Wesley-Plear added that there was a meeting a few years ago to address this, and there were numerous concerns voiced to the school board. Most of the students at the meeting, a majority from Capital High, felt that they were being treated differently or more harshly than other students because there was an officer at their school. She added that she was unclear of what the PROs were supposed to be doing in the schools. Councilmember Wesley-Plear asked how the schools are selected. Beneteau replied that there are officers in all of the high schools because of a general assumption that there is more likely to be violence with older kids. There is only one middle school in Dunbar, so that was chosen. Councilmember Wesley-Plear asked why West Side Middle was chosen of the 3 middle schools in Charleston to have a PRO, adding that the perception of the kids is that they are the “bad kids” because there is an officer at their school. Beneteau replied that he had not participated in any debate as to how those schools were chosen, adding that he would like to see a PRO in every school.

Councilmember McKinney stated that she had also heard a lot of complaints from students. Councilmember Wesley-Plear asked if the students had been surveyed since 2016. Beneteau replied that he was not aware of such a survey. Councilmembers Wesley-Plear and McKinney recommended that one be conducted. A person in the audience asked if there was data as to how the officers were placed and where. Beneteau replied that there are statistics available through the West Virginia Education and Information System that he generally shares with their management committee. Councilmember Steele added that she understood that when these grants became available, the Board made those assessments based what the cities could afford, and those schools have not changed for Charleston in at least 16 years. Melissa Taylor, from the City Manager’s Office, confirmed.

Councilmember Jones stated that there is higher crime numbers on the West Side than any other part of Charleston, and he would feel better as a parent to have an officer at West Side Middle. Councilmember Jones asked what happens when a student is caught with drugs. Beneteau stated that it would depend on the level of the drug crime. Simple possessions would normally be handled by the school, whereas an intent to deliver might be reported. He added that discretion and common sense is used when

making those decisions.

Councilmember Snodgrass stated that she understood part of the reason in having officers in the school was to act as a community liaison, and asked if it was similar to Handle With Care. Councilmember Wesley-Plear replied that, having had that training, the program has fizzled out at the Elementary level. It was more a notification that something had happened at home, so that school staff would be aware to handle that student with care. The next level would be to refer the child/family for mental health assistance. Principal of Capital High School, Larry Bailey, stated that the initial notification comes law enforcement, who notifies all staff, adding that the child will typically also see a counselor.

Councilmember McKinney stated that it was insensitive to justify having officers at West Side Middle simply because there is high crime. She wanted to find a way for the kids to be able to speak for themselves. Principal of West Side Middle, John Wilkerson, agreed, saying that their PRO has more to do with outside than within the school. Their PRO works with the staff to develop a safety plan for the school to keep bad elements out and protect students. Since their PRO, Cpl. Stacy Loftus, has been assigned to their school (about 9 years), no child has been arrested, and Wilkerson has never received a complaint about him. He added that the PRO program gives a positive interaction between the officer and the students. Additionally, students are willing to come to Cpl. Loftus over matters that they would not with school staff.

Councilmember McKinney stated that there was a difference in having the same officer there for many years, which was not what the high schools had. Bailey added that they have had the same officer for the past 4 years. He added that the PRO is not there to patrol the halls, but to be a resource for the school. Additionally, they are the only person that has access to use NARCAN. Councilmember Steele confirmed that there is no Board of Education policy on NARCAN.

A member of the audience was recognized, and asked why those interactions have to come from an armed police officer instead of a counselor. Wilkerson replied that a PRO should not take the place of a counselor, and that some kids will gravitate to adults differently. He added that the more caring adults are available at a school, the better.

Councilmember Steele asked Deputy Chief Scott Dempsey to speak about how PROs are chosen. He stated that when a position becomes open, a notice is put out to all officers. As long as the requirements are met (length of service, training, etc.), all the letters of application are sent to the Commanding Officers to select the best qualified officer. Councilmember McKinney asked if the PRO wear uniforms. Deputy Chief Dempsey replied that mostly they are dressed out of uniform.

The PRO for Capital High, Cpl. Travis Hill, added that he had heard of stories before his time at the school, and hoped he was changing how students view the Police. He relayed a story where a student wouldn't interact with him, but later came to him after a tragic event to discuss their safety, and now they have a positive relationship. A

member of the audience agreed with the importance of having trusted adults in kids lives, however, he added that the problem is when there is a direct line to a broken and damaging criminal justice system. He added that everything described could be done by an agent who is not armed. Bailey replied that for certain levels of drug offenses, the police would have to be called no matter what. Councilmember King added that PROs also have the power to protect students and staff. Councilmember Snodgrass thanked the PROs and Principals present. Councilmember Overstreet agreed that there should be more counselors, but not to negate having PROs.

Councilmember Wesley-Plear asked if a lock-down plan was different in schools without a PRO. Beneteau replied that, generally speaking, those procedures are common to all schools, although it is enhanced by having an armed professional already present in the building. The principals present offered to give personal tours of their schools to the Committee members. Councilmember Wesley-Plear asked how the PROs were evaluated (a rubric or scoring guide, for example). Deputy Chief Dempsey replied that they follow up with reports and with the Commanders.

Councilmember Jones motioned to approve Resolution No. 472-21. Councilmember McKinney seconded the motion. With the majority of members present voting in the affirmative with 1 Nay from Wesley-Plear, the resolution was approved.

Councilmember McKinney motioned to adjourn. Councilmember Jones seconded. Meeting adjourned.