

Task Force Statement On Trauma in Community Conversations

One of the goals of this Task Force is to create a safe place for community to come together and create a model for public safety that empowers community and promotes well-being. We also want to ensure that our work is restorative, healing, and trauma eliminating, not trauma producing.

This is important to understand in or conversations with city officials, especially police and public safety officials. First there is a significant power differential between police and public safety officials and community members on this Task Force. Community members do not have a well-organized union backing them as they attempt to create solutions. Community does not have a large, weaponized paramilitary force backing them. Police, District Attorney, Public Safety, and in many ways City Council, have approximately 1,500 armed officers ready to assist and support them.

Furthermore there are people on this Task Force who have experienced police brutality, harassment, and injury. Like anyone who has experienced abuse, it is very difficult to enter these types of spaces with your victimizer or even those who resemble them. Listening to law enforcement say things like, “if you only knew how difficult our jobs are, you’d understand how these types of misconducts can happen from time to time” is like listening to a school superintendent say, “if you only knew how difficult it is being a teacher, you’d understand how abuse happens from time to time.”

Individuals who have been traumatized by police are vulnerable to institutional re-victimization, such as when city officials dismiss or downplay the severity of those experiences. This happened to community members when I served on the Use of Force Advisory Committee, and several people reported it happened when Director Robinson presented to this Task Force two weeks ago. During a Q&A with the Task Force, Director Robinson provided several examples of how city officials can thoughtlessly perpetuate and exacerbate the harms caused by these institutional abuses. I asked a few individuals to share their thoughts and here are some examples that they shared with me:

- Robinson’s responses were often glib and dismissive; when asked how his department planned to promote community healing when officers kill unarmed civilians, Robinson spoke instead of how policing is the most difficult job in the world. He described waking up each morning with dread, wondering whether it would be necessary to use force that day, because

“shooting someone messes up a police officer’s life forever.” He did acknowledge that the murder of George Floyd has highlighted the lack of trust between Denver citizens and law enforcement and that community healing will be “an entire program” within his department.

- Robinson also frequently laughed while responding, though it is unclear why the topic of police killing unarmed civilians - deaths he described as “unfortunate” – elicited such a response.
- Robinson was evasive and dismissive in response to concerns that the Denver police sweeps of homeless encampments are both inhumane and ineffective, particularly when housing is not among the list of services offered in the course of these sweeps. Robinson asked “Why are we pivoting to homelessness?,” effectively derailing the discussion until task force members explained to the Executive Director of the Department of Public Safety that homelessness is fundamentally an issue of public safety and thus relevant to the work of the Task Force.
- Near the end of the session, Robinson said he would be joining us more often. This felt more like a threat than a gesture of good faith.
- Finally, after 90 minutes of saying he heard us, Robinson said he believed that the Task Force would benefit from hearing from more police officers. As many of the Task Force participants have been directly victimized by police officers, this suggestion was tone-deaf and inappropriate.

As Project Coordinator, neither the facilitation team, nor I will allow members of this body to be traumatized or re-victimized at these meetings. I am asking that everyone associated with law enforcement, and city officials, please be mindful of your positions, and the impact your comments may have on people. Take into consideration that we approach this work from varying perspectives. Be even more conscientious that there are those in this room who have been abused by the very system you represent.

One of the reasons we live stream these meetings is because we want to show Denver, and all of America, what it looks like when all of community comes together to create solutions to the centuries old problems we have faced with policing and public safety. We will show that these conversations can be conducted in a way that is thoughtful, respectful, and promotes healing. After all, we are the Denver Task Force to Reimagine Policing and Public Safety.