

# In forum, community leaders discuss how to make policing less lethal without compromising public safety

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While the phrase has become a potent rallying cry during the national reckoning over racial injustice, “defunding the police” is much easier said than done.

And it might not even be possible in Utah’s larger cities, which are obligated to maintain a police force, according to Salt Lake City Council member Chris Wharton.

“There are a number of state laws that regulate what Salt Lake City can and cannot do as a municipality within the state of Utah,” said Wharton, speaking Monday evening in an online forum on policing reform hosted by the Alliance for a Better Utah. “We’re interested in making all the reforms that we can under the existing law.”

Wharton was joined by Bountiful Police Chief Tom Ross; Jeanetta Williams, the president of NAACP Salt Lake Branch; and activist Jade Arter for the public discussion organized in response to recent deaths of Black citizens at the hands of white police officers. The main theme explored ways to make policing less lethal and more equitable without compromising public safety.

For Ross, withholding financial resources is a nonstarter.

“When we’re fighting to try to employ officers, everyone admits that we don’t pay our officers enough. I hear that all the time, everywhere we go,” said Ross, currently serving as president of the Utah Chiefs of Police Association.

“So when you’re sending a message, it sounds like we’re going to take more money away from police. Of course, we’re going to be concerned about that.”

But he freely acknowledged that policing can be improved and his 109-member association stands ready to listen.

“Our efforts to date have been to meet with anyone that has concerns or issues with police reform, questions are being asked on how law enforcement deals with people of color and certainly the equity and disparities that that have been raised,” Ross said. “We’re trying to gather as much information, what the recommendations are, what the solutions are, so that we can take that back to our membership in law enforcement and start looking for ways to improve our relationship with our communities.”

You can start by getting HB415 repealed, said Arter, an organizer with Utah Against Police Brutality, referring to the [2019 legislation that imposed limits on Utah municipalities'](#) ability to discipline officers accused of excessive force.

“We’re fighting to affirm our inalienable right, democratic right of the people to decide how we are policed,” Arter said. “Communities should have a say in what public safety looks like, to hold officers accountable for violent actions and prevent the loss of human life and violent incidents such as the one in Rose Park last week where an autistic child was shot while running away after his parents called for an intervention.”

The speakers agreed that reforms should entail greater transparency in officer discipline, diversifying police forces and better training in dealing with those suffering from mental health crises. Arter was frustrated that Utah officers' use of deadly force is almost always found to be justified, even in cases such as the shootings of Patrick Harmon and Darian Hunt, where the person killed posed no apparent threat to the officers.

Williams noted that district attorneys are bound by Utah’s use-of-force statutes in deciding whether to prosecute a police shooting.

“We can’t be so judgmental about what’s going on in a person’s mind or what’s going on with police officers as well. It’s something that people need to kind of step back on,” Williams said. “If people want the rulings to be different, then they’re going to have to change the laws.”

Salt Lake County District Attorney Sim Gill — recently the target of angry protests over his decision against charging two Salt Lake City officers in the May shooting death of Bernardo Palacios-Carbajal — recommended a number of such changes in Utah law that would raise the bar for justifying deadly force.

But beyond legislation, transparency and training can make a huge difference in curbing police violence, Williams said.

“We want to make sure that there is accountability, making sure that when incidents happen that police officers are accurately reporting and where everything is transparent,” she said. “So the transparency, accountability and de-escalation goes hand-in-hand.”

Salt Lake City has led the state in reform efforts, according to Wharton.

“Our goal is to build a city where all residents feel safe and protected. Some of the current measures that the [City] Council is working on is demilitarizing the police, preventing use of decommissioned military equipment and increasing civilian oversight through our police civilian review board, elevating Black and brown voices and bringing those voices that have traditionally marginalized communities to the table,” he said.

Ross cautioned that he has to answer not only to reform-minded civilians but also to the officers who work for him.

“If I have an officer whose family or the officer believes that their life now is more in danger, I have to be accountable to them as well,” the Bountiful police chief said. “I think that’s part of why law enforcement moves maybe slower than people want. We’re always worried about unintended consequences.”

But he agreed that police and the communities they serve would benefit from more dialogue.

“We have to do this balanced. We need officers, men and women of all races, gender, sexual orientation. We need everyone in our profession responding on those calls when you dial 911,” Ross said. “I’m trying desperately, as a leader of an organization, to make sure that we can balance all of that and still make the changes that make our communities feel better, safer, listen to, more equitable and we’re not marginalizing.”