



Testimony for the New York City Council Public Safety Committee Community Policing | March 3, 2015

Submitted by: Alyssa Aguilera, Political Director, VOCAL-NY. Contact: alyssa@vocal-ny.org and (917) 200-1446.

Good morning, my name is Alyssa Aguilera and I'm the Political Director at VOCAL-NY, a statewide grassroots membership organization building power among low-income people affected by HIV/AIDS, the drug war, and mass incarceration, along with the organizations that serve us, to create healthy and just communities. We accomplish this through community organizing, leadership development, public education, direct services, participatory research and direct action.

I want to thank Chair Gibson and the rest of Public Safety committee for inviting us to participate in this important hearing. Our members are both disproportionately the victims of crime and the targets of police enforcement activities. Therefore, we take a great interest in how policing is carried out in New York.

We share many of the recent concerns about overly aggressive, discourteous, and unlawful policing that have been raised in the last several months. Every day our members have unwanted and problematic interactions with the police including unjustified stops and searches, frequent issuances of summonses for non-criminal behavior, and harassment and intimidation by police. In the first 9 months of 2014, 55% of almost 600 members we surveyed reported being arrested by police, often more than once, mostly for marijuana possession and MTA violations. A similar number had received summonses for low level "Broken Windows" type infractions. Overall, they reported the same or worsening relations with the NYPD during that period. There is a need for major reforms in how policing is conducted in New York City.

We are very concerned, however, that the leadership of both the NYPD and the City Council are proposing to expand the headcount of the NYPD under the guise of expanding community policing. Too often, community policing means more intensive and invasive policing of minor disorderly behavior that serves to criminalize mostly young people of color without dealing with the underlying causes of these community concerns.

The majority of New Yorkers are not actively engaged in the political life of their local neighborhood. Some may be politically active in other venues, others may be focused on national or international concerns and most are caught up in the daily struggles of home and work. Part of the problem lies in the nature of community. Those who are active in community affairs are not always representative of the full diversity of views and experiences in our many neighborhoods. Community Boards and Precinct Community Councils tend to be populated by long-time residents, those that own rather than rent their homes, business owners, and landlords. In the case of Community Boards, some of these people do not even live in the neighborhood in question. The views of renters, youth, homeless people, and the most socially marginalized are rarely represented in these bodies.

Community policing tends to turn all neighborhood problems into police problems. Across the country, community police programs have been based on the idea that the community should bring its myriad

concerns about condition in the community to the police, who will work with them on developing solutions. Invariably, however, the range of community problems extends far beyond serious crime. Why should the police necessarily be the sole or even lead agency in developing strategies to address community concerns about disorder and public safety?

One of the most frequent concerns of neighborhood residents is the presence of low level drug dealing and use. This generates a tremendous number of calls to 311 and 911. Enhancing the ability of police to respond to these community concerns will just further criminalize people involved with drugs. The strategy of criminalizing these activities has done nothing to reduce the availability and negative effects of drugs on individuals or communities and has produced substantial negative collateral consequences for those arrested and has been a major drain on city resources. The cost of running each bed at Rikers Island comes to over \$150,000 a year; money better spent on prevention, treatment, and jobs programs.

There is also extensive research that shows that most complaints that “community representatives” take to the police are about “quality of life” problems rather than serious crime. People tend to raise concerns about local disorderly conditions such as noise and traffic complaints, or public behaviors they find annoying such as low level drug dealing, prostitution, and any gatherings of young people. More intensive police attention to these “community” concerns will invariably lead to further unnecessary and counterproductive harassment and criminalization of many of New York’s poorest and most vulnerable.

As an example, at a recent 67th Precinct Community Council meeting in Flatbush, Brooklyn the main complaint of community members was the regular presence of homeless people in and around businesses at the corner of Church and Nostrand Avenues. Some of these people had obvious mental health problems and others panhandled for money for subsistence purposes. The local police commander pledged to respond to these concerns but acknowledged limited capacity and resources to do so. Increased police responsiveness to these kinds of concerns, in the absence of new services, will lead to the harassment and arrest of these people in the name of community policing. This is not the kind of improved policing we need.

To the extent that police need to be involved in managing these community concerns, it should be restricted to either responding to truly dangerous conditions. The could also play a role as gatekeeper to enhanced services, such as how Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program diverts low-level drug offenders and sex workers to social services instead of jail. For too long the city has overrelied on the police as first responders to a range of community concerns that might better be dealt with through other city agencies. The police primarily have punitive tools at their disposal, such as arrest and the use of force. What is needed instead, are responses that are less punitive and provide real pathways out of homelessness, addiction, joblessness, and health crises.

We do want the police to be more courteous, professional, and respectful, but expanding the ability of police to respond to community concerns will lead to more criminalization of people trying to survive when their most basic needs are not being met. Therefore, we oppose any increase in the number of police at this time and instead call on the City Council to use whatever resources it would have used to increase the headcount of the NYPD, to instead invest in supportive housing, drug treatment, and health services that can play a much more positive and sustained role in reducing very real community concerns about disorder and public safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.