

Police reform law one part of rebuilding trust

Amy Nichols and Steve Schulz

Jul 3, 2020 Updated Jul 7, 2020

From the COVID-19 pandemic to the tragic death of George Floyd that sparked protests and calls for justice, recent months have brought significant change to law enforcement and our communities.

The response from lawmakers and law enforcement in Colorado related to calls for police reform has been swift and meaningful. Groups like the County Sheriffs of Colorado, the Colorado Fraternal Order of Police and Colorado Association of Chiefs of Police have worked collaboratively to address public safety and policy. In early June, in response to George Floyd's tragic death, peace officers called on the Colorado legislature and Gov. Jared Polis to make it a crime when officers fail to intervene in cases of unreasonable force, even before legislation was introduced.

We all agree that communities should be safe for all Coloradans, whom we have sworn to serve and protect. Law enforcement supports efforts to increase transparency and accountability and, frankly, conceptually is in favor of many of the provisions that were included in [Senate Bill 217](#).

Colorado peace officers understand the anger within our communities. As leaders in the law enforcement community, we haven't heard a single officer who has seen the video of George Floyd's death who thinks the actions of the officers involved were even remotely right. We have also heard the frustration of committed, dedicated officers who are now being lumped together with officers who have harmed instead of protected. We support processes that will help identify and weed out bad players, while empowering and encouraging solid leadership, officers and deputies.

The way law enforcement operates in Colorado has changed very quickly, and many have asked how the new law will impact how officers and deputies carry out their jobs. Right now, there is no straightforward answer. The passage of Senate Bill 217 was completed in just 11 days. During that time, 43 amendments were added to the bill, and more than 140 were drafted for potential consideration. Many of the technical issues that could have had significant and dangerous unintended consequences were identified and addressed by bill sponsors and lawmakers. This is why it is important to have a collaborative stakeholder process, including input from the professionals within public safety, when having these important discussions about policy and reform.

Many of the provisions within SB 217 are already in place, and some have been for a significant time, throughout the state's law enforcement agencies. However, other provisions now in statute represent a significant change to the way peace officers do their jobs. It will take time to understand the full impact of these quickly enacted changes, and there were potential concerns raised that were not addressed during the brief time that SB 217 was considered by the General Assembly.

Law enforcement officers know the dangers of the job when choosing this career. The profession requires hard work and long hours, with risk of injury and death looming daily. Officers are at higher risk for suicide, divorce and substance use disorders because of repeated exposure to high-stress, life-threatening situations. These first responders do this important work anyway. They show up each day because the rewards of serving their communities cannot be measured.

When COVID-19 hit, law enforcement and other first responders were heralded as heroes as they continued their work protecting communities, oftentimes at significant risk to their and their families' health. Fast forward a few months, and the sentiment is quite different.

Understandably, there is talk of early retirement amongst officers. They are fearful that even when doing good, solid police work, using the best information available, they may open themselves and their families up to liability. Even before recent protests, recruiting

peace officers was a challenge. We want to make sure reforms are clear, help instill confidence in the profession and help attract a diverse workforce that represents the best and brightest in our communities.

Implementing SB 217 is just one piece of rebuilding community trust. Ongoing conversations are needed and welcomed by law enforcement. Emotions have been high, and the stakes of making meaningful change are even higher, making it critical to really listen to each other, to see the many goals we have in common. Meaningful change extends beyond just legislation.

We also need to focus on prevention and changes that address culture, reduce violent crimes and improve community relations. We all want more accountability, transparency and to build trust. We are optimistic we are on the road to making that happen here in Colorado and nationally.

We are committed to keeping the lines of communication open between law enforcement agencies, lawmakers and the communities we serve to continuously improve the law enforcement profession while preserving public safety.

Amy Nichols is executive director of the County Sheriffs of Colorado. Steve Schulz is president of the Colorado Fraternal Order of Police.