



To: Joint Committee on the First Special Session of 2020
Date: June 23, 2020
Re: Police Reform

Sent via email to: j1ss.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov

Dear Co-Chair Courtney, Co-Chair Kotek, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Loretta Smith and I am a resident of Portland, Oregon, located in Multnomah County. From working as the Multnomah County Outreach Director for U.S. Senator Ron Wyden, to serving as a Multnomah County Commissioner for eight years, I've held many titles over the course of my career in public service, but today I am simply here as a black woman, a single mother, who raised a black son in this state.

A mother's instinct is to protect her child, and I fought tooth and nail to do just that, but there was always one thing I knew I could never fully protect him from, and that was a traumatic encounter with the police.

I taught him all of the things all black parents teach their children about encounters with the police – never make any sudden movements, always keep both hands in plain sight of the officers, don't raise your voice or be disrespectful. I taught him everything I could so that when, not if, he had a traumatic encounter with the police, he would make it home alive.

We train our children how to cope with the inherent, systemic racism and violence found in traditional policing; we train them how to survive encounters with public servants who are sworn to protect and serve.

As you are all aware, our community is experiencing a moment unlike anything we've ever seen before. The murder of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department has ignited a movement of change that has quickly spread around the globe. The question that we face here in Oregon is whether we will rise to the calling of this moment to create long overdue change for historically oppressed and disenfranchised communities, or let this moment pass us by without aggressively addressing the systemic racism and violence found in our current system of policing.

I am here today to ask that you support the package of legislation before you that will begin to dismantle the longstanding militarization of our police force so that we can truly reimagine what public safety looks like in our state.

Our ability to fully reimagine public safety will be directly dependent on our desire to finally end state sponsored violence against members of our own community – most often who are people of color. Together, we can reimagine public safety in a way that is centered in community and seeks to dismantle the racist, violent, oppressive tenants that were baked into our system long before any officer currently on the street ever wore a badge. Public safety centered in community isn't the enemy of liberation and justice, a racist and militarized system is.

To be clear, today is just the beginning of many courageous steps we will need you to take in the future if we are to make “Black Lives Matter” more than a trendy slogan in this state. And while law enforcement may be the area we are beginning with, I hope that everyone realizes that the pervasive nature of racism and discrimination in this state's public institutions extend far beyond the police.

So please take decisive action during this special session to end law enforcement's use of chokeholds and any tactics that inhibit a person's ability to breathe; prohibit law enforcement agencies from using tear gas, long range acoustic devices or sound cannons, and rubber bullets as a matter of crowd control; require law enforcement officers to intervene and report unreasonable/excessive uses of force; put the Oregon Attorney General in charge of cases involving deadly and/or unreasonable use of force by law enforcement; create a statewide database of law enforcement discipline actions; and make it harder for arbitrators to overturn law enforcement discipline.

Any public servant who has the discretionary power of life and death in their hands must be held to the highest of standards; this package of legislation gets us closer to that goal.

In closing, I also look forward to working with you all in the 2021 Legislative Session to end the practice of qualified immunity for law enforcement as they have so courageously and expediently done in Colorado. Thank you for your time today.

In Partnership,

Loretta Smith