

# Councilman Reynolds: “This has got to be a completely transparent conversation”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police June 14, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the George Floyd killing* 

*from Jacqueline Palochko, Sarah M. Woicik, and Manuel Gamiz, Jr. “Movement afoot to reform Allentown, Bethlehem police departments, make use-of-force policies public.” Morning Call, June 13, 2020.*

As communities across the country demand changes in police tactics after the death of another black man at the hands of a white officer, Allentown and Bethlehem city council members are calling for reviews and possible reforms in use-of-force and other policies.

Bethlehem council will discuss the police department’s policies next week, while Allentown Councilman Joshua Siegel plans to recommend changes at a council meeting this month.

The proposals in Allentown and Bethlehem aren’t as drastic as in Minneapolis, where a majority of the city council supports disbanding the police force after four officers were fired and charged in the May 25 death of George Floyd. Reformers in the Lehigh Valley want the departments to be more transparent about policies and complaints, emphasize de-escalation methods, and engage the community. They have joined a chorus of leaders calling for changes in police tactics amid Black Lives Matter protests in cities across the country, including Philadelphia, where the city council wants to ban kneeholds and chokeholds.

In Bethlehem, Councilman J. William Reynolds and Councilwoman Grace Crampsie Smith sent a memo Tuesday to police Chief Mark DiLuzio, asking for details about the use-of-force policy, officer training requirements and the department’s de-escalation techniques. They also proposed a community engagement initiative involving residents, police officers, school representatives and social justice organizations.

The Bethlehem Police Department shared a heavily redacted version of its use-of-force policy with The Morning Call, blacking out sections on

justification for use of force, the use-of-force model, levels of resistance and control, use-of-force considerations, use of deadly force and restrictions on use of deadly force.

DiLuzio said releasing an unredacted document detailing the department's use-of-force policy "would compromise the safety of individual officers and the public and make it easier for criminals to elude prosecution."

Some of the changes reformers are recommending in Allentown and Bethlehem were in place, the police departments say, even before a Minneapolis police officer kneeled for nearly nine minutes on Floyd's neck, killing him and triggering worldwide outrage and daily protests.

In Bethlehem, neither Reynolds nor Smith have seen the department's use-of-force policy, but both believe the public should have access to it. Reynolds said it was unrealistic to expect the community to be able to hold police accountable without knowing what the policies say.

"I do think this has got to be a completely transparent conversation," Reynolds said.

In Bethlehem, change was driven by a botched drug raid 23 years ago at a South Side home. There, police shot John Hirko Jr. 11 times, killing him, and threw a flash bang grenade that burned down the house as Hirko's girlfriend narrowly escaped.

A federal jury found the police department used excessive force, leading Bethlehem to settle with Hirko's family for \$7.39 million. In 2015, Bethlehem cut the final check to pay off that debt. But Mayor Robert Donchez said the reforms that blossomed from the incident remain.

The police department became both state and nationally accredited and transformed into what Donchez called a more community-minded agency.

"When you look at the city's police history, the Hirko incident led the city to reevaluate the role of its police department," Donchez said. "The accreditation holds us to a higher standard than some other police departments. I'm not saying there's not always room for improvement,

but this did add an increased accountability to the Bethlehem Police Department.”

Reynolds said he sees a community engagement initiative as a starting point for building more trust between residents and the police department, as a space “for the community to create the solution over time and solve the problems over time.”

Crampsie Smith said, “It is really important that our black and brown communities have a voice. . . . We need to get input from the community. What is their priority?”

The daughter of a police chief with two nephews in law enforcement, Crampsie Smith said she understands the important role police serve in communities, but she believes they’ve grown more aggressive over the years. She said she’d like to see them go back to a model focused on guardianship and protection.

Cultural competency training could help officers recognize and stop their own biases, Crampsie Smith said. And she believes de-escalation training won’t just create a better relationship with the community but could save lives.

Donchez expects the city to have a response to the memo early next week, followed by a joint public safety meeting with council to keep the discussion moving forward.