

TULSA WORLD

Policing: Widely different perspectives outlined during state House panel discussion

October 7, 2020

Randy Krehbiel

Tuesday's policing study by the Oklahoma House of Representatives was a sort of good cop, bad cop routine.

The first 3½ hours, led by Public Safety Committee Chairman Justin Humphrey, R-Lane, consisted of police chiefs, sheriffs and other law enforcement officials telling what an extraordinary job their officers do under increasingly difficult circumstances.

The last 2½ hours, led by Rep. Regina Goodwin, D-Tulsa, belonged to criminal justice and police reform advocates insisting things aren't quite as wonderful as all that.

There were a lot of disagreements.

In the morning, Tulsa Fraternal Order of Police President Jerad Lindsey said "driving while Black" does not exist.

In the afternoon, former Tulsa Police Chief Drew Diamond said it most assuredly does.

In the morning, Lindsey and others said eliminating the extra layer of liability protection known as qualified immunity would cause law officers to refuse assignments and cities and counties to be "sued out of existence."

In the afternoon, a lawyer from the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute said qualified immunity undermines community confidence in law enforcement and allows bad cops to hang onto their jobs.

Each side came armed with their own facts and figures, prompting Humphrey to declare: "We've got to do a better job of gathering information data."

And there were a few areas of agreement, most notably on training.

Humphrey and several morning witnesses mentioned decreased funding for the Council on Law Enforcement Education and Training, or CLEET, which oversees all training and certification of law officers, as well as licensing private security and other related occupations.

"If you're worried about police acting inappropriately, then let's get some money in training," said Humphrey. "Let's train officers how to act and react."

Goodwin didn't disagree, but that didn't seem to be the point she most wanted made.

"We need legislation," she said. "We need action. Less talk, more action."

That could be a big job, given the scope of material covered Tuesday and the lack of agreement on much of it.

Humphrey, as chairman of the House committee overseeing law enforcement, conceded a need to review use-of-force policies but not the possibility that racial bias is a factor in enforcement — which was one of the main issues Goodwin and her presenters tried to put across.

One of them, Cindy Bear, said the transition program she's operated in Claremore for 13 years began experiencing unprecedented scrutiny from local police after more women of color were assigned to it.

"My women have been pulled over ... walking down the sidewalk, their pictures have been taken, their purses have been dumped and searched," Bear said. "They've been told if there's a crime in the area, the police want their picture."

Humphrey said the speeding tickets he's received over the years proves white people get stopped by the police, too, and Lindsey said **data showing Tulsa police detain Blacks at higher rate than whites** had been "manipulated."

Any discrepancy, he said, is the result of socio-economic status, not race.

One area on which the law enforcement speakers did not unite was the role of unions. While Lindsey, as a state and local FOP officer, defended them, several in administrative positions said the union and its contracts wind up protecting officers who should be dismissed.

Also discussed at length were choke and carotid holds, a restraint tactic that blocks air or blood to the brain. Such holds used by law enforcement have played a role in several deaths in recent years.

Loretta Radford, a former assistant U.S. attorney in Tulsa who is now director of Oklahoma City University's Center for Criminal Justice, said too many law officers don't know how to properly apply the holds or that "choke" holds — those that cut off air — are generally more dangerous than those that cut off blood flow.

Moore Police Chief Todd Gibson described the psychological scarring law officers suffer, and specifically talked about a young female officer who was sent to a domestic disturbance call within 30 minutes of being unable to revive a drowned 3-year-old.

He also said police shootings of unarmed civilians are statistically rare, and even then are often the result of a physical attack.

Lindsey said the public should be concerned about the disproportionate number of Black Tulsans being murdered than the occasional African American killed by police.

The final say, though, went to Tiffany Crutcher, whose brother Terence Crutcher was killed by Tulsa Police Officer Betty Shelby in 2016.

“I remember hearing an expert say ... that police aren’t trained to take gambles with their lives,” Crutcher said. “But you have to ask yourself, is it OK to take a gamble with a citizen’s life?”