

What 'defunding the police' means: it's not about eliminating the police department

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PROVIDENCE – What “defunding the police” means depends on who is using the term.

But generally speaking, the phrase refers not to eliminating police departments altogether – that has rarely happened in America – but to a redistribution of police resources to non-police programs and policies advocates say are better-equipped to address racial and social inequities.

“I believe ‘defunding the Police’ would be a divest and invest model, divesting money from the Providence Police budget and re-investing it into our communities, mental-health services, and social-service programs in order to improve public safety,” **James Vincent**, president of the Providence Branch of the NAACP, told The Journal on Wednesday.

“There is no evidence that more police leads to less crime. However, in Providence, there is evidence that less police combined with a once ‘radical’ community policing model has led to a dramatic drop in crime,” Vincent added. “In the name of community justice, now is the precise time to develop still another new model which will further enhance public safety.”

“The question has always been, what does a particular community want its police force to look and operate like?” **Col. Hugh T. Clements Jr.**, Providence’s police chief, wrote in an email. “Many of the social ills have been, rightly or wrongly, placed squarely at the feet of police, such as chronic drug and alcohol addiction, mental health issues and homelessness.

“For the last several years we’ve had clinicians from Family Service of Rhode Island and The Providence Center ride along with the uniform members of our department throughout their tours of duty as they patrol the streets of our City. This concept has allowed us the ability to divert individuals from the ‘criminal justice’ system...

“These concepts should and can be expanded on but, as Chief of this department, I am opposed to the defunding our present budget allocation for many reasons. As always, we are open for conversations and willing to embrace change. We have done that on complicated issues in the past and hear the voice of many of our partners in the community loudly.”

City Council President Sabina Matos said, “As I’ve spoken with community members I’ve come to learn that ‘defund the police’ is a policy premised on the notion that police are currently tasked with too many roles and therefore not the best equipped or trained to handle them all.

“They perform the work of social workers, substance abuse counselors, therapists, life coaches, mentors, student resource officers along with performing their regular public safety roles. I believe that this conversation is definitely worthy of discussion and scrutiny by this Council as we evaluate the next fiscal year’s budget.”

“This is a delicate balance,” **the Rev. Chris Abbulime**, pastor of King’s Tabernacle Church in Johnston, told The Journal.

“On the one hand, we want an effective and motivated police departments across America, on the other we want police accountability.

“Recent killings of Blacks call for revisiting and reforming the police Bill of Rights. And to make the use of body camera for all police officers mandatory. I do not support abolishing police and policing altogether, but to scrutinize current police budget and identify cuts that can be used to support social programs in minority neighborhoods.

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00:00 / 17:30

"What I do support is reforming the police Bill of Rights. We should not have two separate justice systems: one for police officers and one for civilians. I think rather, officers who wear the badge should be held to a higher standard. To whom much is given, much should be required."

Lorén M. Spears, who is head of the Tomaquag Museum and is married to a police officer, told The Journal: "When I hear people say defund the police, I interpret that as making a radical shift in the way that we police in the United States, to create a system that does not criminalize certain aspects of life, particularly for communities of color. These are actually related to healthcare, economics, jobs, education and social services."

Spears supports this shift.



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Loren Spears on racism podcast

00:00 / 14:54

"For example," Spears said, "a person of color that has special needs, say autism, may be addressed by police in a forceful manner that escalates the circumstance rather than remediate the problem. The problem that is actually a medical or educational concern. The systemic violence and subjugation that has taken place in this country from its founding has infiltrated the system of justice and has criminalized communities of color."

A request sent through a spokesperson for **Mayor Jorge Elorza's** position on defunding was returned with this statement attributed to Elorza:

"We are living through a unique moment and I want to make sure that we will not let it pass without bringing about real, structural change. We have committed to the '8 Can't Wait' Campaign and to the Obama Foundation pledge to Review, Engage, Report, and Reform our policies."

On its website, the 8 Can't Wait campaign states "the end goal for all of us should be absolute liberation from policing, and [we] encourage visitors to the site to support the range of organizers who are making progress in employing other strategies towards abolition: defunding the police and reinvesting in community."

Elorza's statement concluded: "In addition, while the FY21 budget I presented in April is before the Providence City Council for review, my administration is currently exploring reallocating resources to best respond to our community needs. I look forward to continuing to engage with the community and finding ways to adopt policies that address structural racism and make us a stronger, more resilient city."

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