

New Bedford Mayor Mitchell signs on to Obama Foundation's Mayor's Pledge

Mayor Jon Mitchell has signed on to the "Mayor's Pledge," established by the Obama Foundation's My Brother's Keeper Alliance and announced the formation of a Commission on Police Use of Force Policies to carry out the actions outlined in the pledge.

The Mayor's Pledge is aimed at addressing use of force policies in police departments across the country. The Obama Foundation's Mayor's Pledge calls on mayors across the United States to commit to the following four actions:

1. REVIEW your use of force policies.
2. ENGAGE your communities by including a diverse range of input, experiences, and stories in your review.
3. REPORT the findings of your review to your community and seek feedback.
4. REFORM your communities' police use of force policies.

Mayor Mitchell has appointed Councillor Brian K. Gomes, Chairman of the City Council Public Safety Committee, to chair the Commission, which will seek input from city residents, review current policies of the police department, and provide a set of recommendations to Mayor Mitchell and Police Chief Joseph Cordeiro on appropriate reforms to police department policies and practices. Other members will be announced later this week.

Along with these steps, Mayor Mitchell and Police Chief Joseph Cordeiro have also announced their commitment to the 8 Can't Wait Campaign, a set of eight policies that a 2016 Campaign Zero study found can decrease police violence by 72%, which will be formally codified in updated policies of the New

Bedford Police Department along with other recommendations of the Commission.

Mayor Mitchell also announced that he supports the adoption of body cameras for sworn officers of the New Bedford Police Department, provided that funding can be secured. Currently, Boston is the only Massachusetts city with body cameras for all officers; Worcester has implemented a pilot program. Given the current economic challenges facing New Bedford, the City is currently seeking to identify funding to be used for body cameras and related software and costs.

In 2013, the City of New Bedford signed an Action Plan with several key community organizations facilitated by the U.S. Department of Justice, under the leadership of Azekah Jennings, a nationally renowned conflict resolution and civil rights specialist who served as Senior Conciliation Specialist in the Department of Justice's Community Relations Service. The Action Plan laid out solutions to strengthen the relations between the police and the community, specifically identifying youth, the public schools, and the immigrant community.

The Action Plan resulted in a review of existing policies on civil rights and public safety, amendment of discipline policies in the New Bedford Public Schools, NAACP and faith-based training on public safety, and has fostered additional platforms for dialogue among city agencies and community organizations with a focus on improved community relations.

In announcing today's steps to further improve police and community relations, Mayor Mitchell released the following statement:

"For nearly two weeks, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, protesters across the country have been expressing their heartfelt and legitimate frustration with the persistence of racist policing in America.

"I am proud that the protests in New Bedford have been

peaceful and respectful. I also commend the professionalism of our police officers, who walked side by side with protesters and enabled them to safely share their opinions.

“Along with Police Chief Cordeiro, I joined the protesters to let them know that we were listening, and that the issues they raised should be taken seriously by elected officials at every level of government, and by all Americans. Despite improvements in police training and recruitment in the last fifty years, the more recent drumbeat of videos depicting the brutalization of African-Americans at the hands of police officers has destroyed any notion that racism has been eradicated from America’s police departments.

“America still has much work to do. I believe that our country cannot lose this moment, not only to right past wrongs, but to secure for itself a more equitable future. It will require all Americans to set aside differences, confront uncomfortable issues, and do the hard work of reform.

“And that work also must be done here. New Bedford has an exceptional history of tolerance and understanding, but we cannot pretend to be perfect. We must strive to improve ourselves so that the benefits of living in our great city extend to everyone. While this is not an overnight exercise, we can take important steps now.

“In a recent post, former President Obama called upon America’s cities to pledge reform of their police department’s use of force policies. Studies consistently show that policies requiring the proportional application of force are effective at avoiding the loss of life, and in the long run, they tend to bolster police morale.

“So I am announcing today that New Bedford will take the Obama Pledge. I will appoint a commission of community leaders to review our police department’s use of force policies, receive feedback from residents, and report out a set of

recommendations within sixty days. The commission will be chaired by Brian Gomes, the Chairman of the City Council's Public Safety Committee, and the remainder of the members will be announced later this week.

"I believe this effort will build on the work of the committee that developed New Bedford's community action plan in 2013, which strengthened the relationship between the police and residents, and helped set up the city for the decline in violent crime we've since experienced. Now is our chance to do even better, and I encourage everyone to offer their opinions and insights along the way, in the hope that we can establish a more caring and just future for our children and grandchildren."