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Police Reform, Housing Access Top Legislative Agenda for 2021

[AUSTIN, TEXAS] - As the City of Austin begins to create a new vision for public safety, one that will finally start to address systemic racism and offer safety for every Austinite, the Austin Justice Coalition will be pushing for critical reforms at the legislature. Proposed bills will hold police accountable for misconduct, reduce force, and address the need to give people affordable housing options in all parts of the city.

“We will be supporting some important local bills,” said Chas Moore, Founder and Director of the Austin Justice Coalition. “We learned over the past few months that state law makes it virtually impossible to fire a Police Chief who has been hired from within the Department. Our very first demand after the tragic murder of Mike Ramos was to fire Manley. I guess we will have to ask our state lawmakers to help Austin bring in a Police Chief with the vision to lead policing in a new, safer direction for all.”

“People ask me all the time, what does ‘defunding police’ have to do with making policing safer for Black people,” continued Moore. “There is not just one solution to the problems we experience with police. The problems caused by sending police to calls they are ill equipped to handle can only be solved by moving our local city budget away from ‘more police’ to ‘more appropriate other staff.’ Meanwhile, officers who kill people enjoy special protection in state law. We need to fix that too. And I was shocked to find out that state law makes it very difficult for local elected officials to replace our Chief, even though here in Austin the Chief is absolutely part of the problem.”

The Austin Justice Coalition will prioritize the following legislation:

- The George Floyd Act recently announced by Chairwoman Senfronia Thompson and the Legislative Black Caucus
- The Sandra Bland legislation ending arrest for nonjailable violations, supported by both Republicans and Democrats in their 2020 platforms
- Reforms to police licensing and oversight (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Sunset)

- Legislation to authorize our elected officials or the City Manager to fire the police chief
- Any legislation that will improve and strengthen the new civilian lead, independent forensics department and the independent 911 emergency dispatch center in Austin
- Civil Service reform to ensure officers can be held accountable for misconduct
- Housing reforms designed to facilitate housing for people returning to our communities from prison and for low income Texans
- Limits on the powers, creation and use of school-based police

“Austin is still a remarkably segregated city. Our old ideas about what is a crime and who are the criminals, and how police should conduct themselves in different parts of the city stem from that history of forcing Black people into ‘their place.’ To change that, Black people need to have access to affordable housing in all parts of the City, and the statutes and funding mechanisms that enforce the old segregation with an unaccountable police also need to change. All these priority bills will help Austin finally reckon the history of racial segregation and the brutal police enforcement of that racialized geography,” said Sukyi McMahon, Strategic Director of the Austin Justice Coalition.

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