Louisville Reimagining and Investing in Public Safety

Cities across the country are current reckoning with structural violence related to long histories of systemic racism and police violence. As the current context provides an opportunity for communities to re-imagine what their public safety infrastructures entail and invest differently in public safety, several key factors will be critical to the effectiveness of attempts at transformation and should guide any efforts sponsored by Louisville Metro Government (LMG). As stated by the National Civic League,

> "The key in these conversations is to take a broad approach, focusing not on policing but public safety. In this way, communities can create a system that not only generates better results but also treats people with respect, a system in which all parts of the community share responsibility--police, nonprofit agencies, residents, businesses and neighborhoods alike, a system that is fair for all, regardless of race, age, nationality, immigration status or gender identity, and a system that offers tranquility through wisdom and collaboration, rather than conflict through command and control."

Specifically, if the Public Safety Committee of Metro Council develops and issues a request for proposals, it should mandate these factors be addressed as criteria for evaluating any submitted proposals.

1. **Acknowledge the damage that needs to be addressed.**
   In light of the historical and current context in Louisville Metro, it is critical for the city to explicitly acknowledge the damage caused by institutions and structures that have been supported and maintained by LMG. This acknowledgment is a necessary first step in gaining community engagement and rebuilding trust in the process.

2. **Adopt a responsive, transparent, nimble process for developing and implementing a strategy.**
   Any process to develop and implement an alternative public safety strategy must be systematically planned and transparent, with intentional, regular communication to the public and mechanisms for the public to respond. In addition, the process must include enough flexibility to make changes based on community input and new knowledge gained. If the process is too rigid to allow for adaptation, it will fail.

3. **Ensure that the strategy is community driven and community governed.**
   This is perhaps the most important factor, as well as the most nuanced. Based on existing community science, as well as the experiences of multiple other communities, engaging people from across the community—not just specific groups—and having them shape

the strategies that will ultimately be implemented is key to effective change. For communities and individuals who have suffered the most from the current public safety infrastructure, self-determination will be paramount in this process and whatever it yields. This requires that whoever is facilitating the process have strong local relationships and rapport and the ability to engage and amplify marginalized voices, and the skills to ensure that people are (and feel) heard, regardless of whether their specific idea is reflected in the final outcome. This also requires that community members have power within the planning and implementation process.

4. **Develop strategic, systemic plans that can be institutionalized to guarantee sustainability.**
A significant challenge in transformative efforts is that they end up being a one-off from what a community has actually prioritized in order to placate a part of the population. These are typically underfunded and implemented as an appendix to mainstream infrastructure that eventually get abandoned. To invest differently and effectively in public safety, the plan must be strategic and systemic—with the parts intentionally interconnected and institutionalized across structures. Otherwise, it will become one of many pilot projects to fall by the wayside. The commitment must be to the outcome and the process of getting there, regardless of how many iterations it takes. The communities that have developed more equitable, efficient, and effective public safety systems have this commitment in common.

5. **Prioritize community development, healing, and reconciliation.**
One key argument for reimagining public safety is that the current system prioritizes criminalization and subsequent punishment of behavior that often stems from social conditions. This disproportionately harms poor Black and brown communities. From a public health perspective, creating and maintaining systems that offer equitable opportunities to be healthy utilizes a greater, more efficient, more effective lever of change than simply addressing behaviors labeled problematic.

Common themes throughout public calls for action within Louisville Metro as well as those within effective alternative public safety infrastructures in cities across the country include:
   - Understanding how the community itself defines safety—especially those that are currently the least safe;
   - Decriminalizing poverty and its effects (i.e., poor mental health, substance use, homelessness, etc.);
   - Developing robust systems for mental health and addiction recovery that focus on harm reduction;

- Creating a system of professional first responders outside of law enforcement (such as psychologists, social workers, nurses) that becomes the front-line service for non-violent community issues;
- Investing in community-driven systems for ensuring people have educational, occupational, and economic opportunities (supporting homeownership, rental support, affordable housing, economic assistance, legal assistance, re-entry success);
- Supporting a range of services and supports for young people, including out of school time services and programs, as well as amenities and recreation resources within their communities.

6. **Utilize existing examples and evidence together with local community expertise.**

   Many other cities with various similarities to Louisville have developed and implemented alternative public safety strategies, such as Eugene, OR, Denver, CO, Ann Arbor, MI, Minneapolis, MN, Camden, NJ and others. Data and evidence exist both about *how* they did it and how well it *worked.* Two key points in this for Louisville Metro Council to consider are: 1) evidence for tested interventions is for the entire intervention, not just parts of it; and 2) any interventions must be specific to the context of the community. Louisville has a history of picking parts of interventions and implementing them, and then giving up on them when they are not effective without acknowledging that what was effective in achieving a particular result in another community had more components than what Louisville actually replicated. In addition, Louisville's unique history, culture, and dynamics must dictate how interventions are tailored if they are to be effective here.

7. **Commit sufficient time and resources to establish new systems, troubleshoot, and produce results.**
   This point is critical and cannot be understated. The kinds of systemic changes that are targeted take time to show results – these are complex pathways. The community judges Metro Council's priorities based on the budget. If alternative public safety plans are a priority, the budget and actions of the city must reflect that, and there must be a long-term commitment to the community's public safety outcomes.