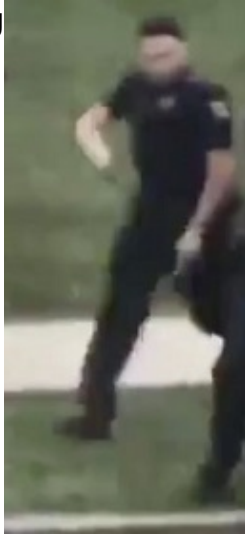


Repair Trust in Pursuit of Racial Equality

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

Wednesday, 02 September 2020 08:51 - Last Updated Wednesday, 02 September 2020 09:16

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/kenosha-jacob-blake-shooting-wsj-s5.jpg>



The Governor called for a special session of the Legislature to reform police practices and improve police accountability. As state leaders, it's our job to make Wisconsin more just and equitable for all residents.

MADISON - This past weekend, hundreds of thousands of Americans came together at the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C to commemorate the anniversary of the March on Washington. Activists stood on the same steps, delivering remarks reminiscent to the same call to action shared 57 years ago from Civil Rights leaders.

During the March on Washington, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his infamous "I Have a Dream" speech, calling for racial equality while recognizing the urgency to act. Dr. King explicitly denounced police brutality, citing its "unspeakable horrors" for people of color. Decades later, this dream memorably described by Dr. King and shared by so many Civil Rights leaders of that time, is still far from reality for so many Americans today.

Just last week, Jacob Blake, a Black man, was shot 7 times in the back by police in Kenosha. To add to the horror, his three children were in the vehicle and witnessed the whole thing. There are so many questions that went through my head in the aftermath of this horrific encounter. But what I do know, for certain, is there are things our generation can do to continue the work for racial equality.

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Back in June, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, Governor Tony Evers and Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes introduced 9 bills aimed at reforming police practices. This package of legislation included measures to establish a statewide use of force standards for all law enforcement agencies; prohibit the use of chokeholds and no-knock search warrants; create a civil cause of action for unnecessarily summoning a law enforcement officer; and more.

Since they introduced this legislative package, the Majority Party hasn't taken any action on it. This isn't the first time Republicans have neglected to act while Wisconsinites are struggling and asking for support. The Majority Party has also failed to fix Wisconsin's outdated unemployment insurance system, act on gun safety bills and provide additional relief during this pandemic.

Last week, in response to the Jacob Blake shooting, Governor Evers called a special session for the Legislature to act on these policing reform bills. I was wholeheartedly prepared to participate in this special session to address the root causes of these appalling encounters. This is what we are called to do when we are elected: repair the broken trust and work toward a more just, equitable state for all residents. Unfortunately, the Majority Party didn't even show up for session; their absence signals their ineptitude and lack of responsibility, especially at a time when Wisconsin needs responsible leaders.

I know many still believe people of color are overreacting to these cases of police brutality, but when you dig deeper, you find there is a history of racial injustice that makes someone with dark skin leery and fearful of police.

Soon after the George Floyd murder, I saw a question, "what age were you the first time a police officer pointed a gun at you?" posted on Facebook that really brought it home for me. The responses were shocking. Black men shared their first encounters that occurred when they were 17, 14, 12 and even 10 years old. That post more than any helped me realize my privilege as a white person. Never in my life have I ever feared that a police officer would pull out his gun and aim it at me. It's hard to imagine living your life fearing a police officer, rather than being relieved that law enforcement has arrived to protect you.



Trust is key to any relationship. When trust is broken, it's almost impossible to restore without a long and painful process. We need to start that process immediately. We all must admit fear and

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distrust has torn us apart; politicians must quit feeding off that fear and get to work to build the trust we need to survive together.

A friend and colleague who represents Milwaukee once said, "Our issues are your issues, just as your issues are our issues." We must keep these words in mind while remembering the sacrifices of so many in the pursuit of racial equality.