

My name is Demetria Shabazz, I live in District 5, and I am a cofounder of the Racial Equity Task Force of Amherst, MA. My comments below are an expansion of my brief words shared with you all on Monday night July 13, 2020 during the public comment portion of the budget hearing.

I ask that you decrease the overall budget for the APD. I request that a significant part of the funds intended for policing go into building permanent antiracist training within the police department and establish an independent community advisory board with subpoena power for police oversight and review.

The reality that racism is a public health crisis has been recognized by public health researchers and psychologists which means that structural racism is not an event it is embedded in our everyday systems of operation - schools, universities, the town government, and policing. It will take ongoing and directed action to change things in this town whereby indigenous and people of color will feel an integral part of this community.

I am requesting that antiracist training become a part of the town government and especially within the police department. I request that the training remain a continual part of the budget and not attained by or renewed through a grant.

As a person of color living within this community, I have witnessed and experienced first-hand, unnecessary questioning and surveillance by the police. My family and friends of color have been profiled and even worse their underage children of color especially my own as well as their sons have been questioned and profiled by police in Amherst. One of my friends has a son who has been stopped and questioned no less than 15 times without arrest, or a ticket. These friends hesitate to come forward because of a fear of further calling attention to themselves and their loved ones.

There has been very little follow up when people have complained and often times my friends of color do not want to lodge an official complaint because they represent vulnerable communities of non-English speakers, immigrants, and people of color in general. These communities feel the brunt of poor training and embedded structural racism and know all too well that there is a thin veneer of welcome just below the surface for BIPOC persons who are most often profiled and followed.

Without free and accessible afterschool and summer activities engaging for youth especially for older young people, these surveillance practices only exacerbate the already hostile climate for young people of color in Amherst.

Good quality and ongoing training are the best use of our tax dollars to not only protect our residents but demonstrate that we are an antiracist community that does not profile our youth leading them toward the school to prison pipeline. In addition, we need and I demand a community advisory board appointed by the people not politicians to serve on behalf of the community helping to improve social services and policing when it is absolutely needed in this town. Examples of an independent civilian review commission with investigatory as well as review authority can be found in San Diego, CA; Austin, TX; Berkley, CA; and Eugene, OR.

Thank you for the time used to discuss these important issues confronting our nation but are just as significant here in Amherst. More time needs to be devoted to the engagement of the public in positive ways, to create a community that does not dismiss, alienate or worse, vilify the BIPOC persons in the town. We will need everyone to solve these deep-seated problems.

I hope that the council and the Town Manager hears the suggestions and the critique as a call to action by groups of residents that want to be involved and included without a move towards defense and shielding the town's current practices. It is time to learn, grow, and become what we aspire to be "the beautiful community," benefiting and valuing the small as well as the large contributions of racial and ethnic groups residing within this community.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Demetria Shabazz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Demetria Rougeaux Shabazz
29 Chapel Rd.
Amherst, MA 01002