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Sheriff Rich Stanek's Oral Remarks on Behalf of the Major County Sheriffs' Association and the National Sheriffs' Association

Good Morning Everyone – I'm Rich Stanek, the Sheriff of Hennepin County, Minnesota and it is my distinct honor to be with you here today.

I am speaking here today on behalf of two organizations – the National Sheriffs' Association and the Major County Sheriffs' Association. I'm currently the Treasurer of the National Sheriffs' Association and the Immediate Past President of the Major County Sheriffs.

I want to first start off by thanking the Task Force for holding this listening session. As it stands now, there is no currently-serving Sheriff on the Task Force on 21st Century Policing – and so this forum today is critical in helping provide the public with insights and experiences from the perspective of Sheriffs.

Let me first start out with a little bit about Sheriffs.

Sheriffs are essential partners in any effort to increase the trust and confidence of the American people in our criminal justice system, and to improve policing in the 21st Century generally.

Sheriffs are **unique** in a number of ways. First, we are **the only** democratically-elected Law Enforcement leaders in the country – and each Sheriff serves as the chief law enforcement officer of their respective county or parish.

As a result, the Office of Sheriff is the law enforcement agency most directly accountable to the public. In order for us to properly and responsibly do our duty, we must – and do – maintain close connection and communication with the communities we serve and protect. Our communities expect this from us.

Additionally, Sheriffs are the only law enforcement officers in the nation that provide the full line of criminal justice services, including corrections thru the operation of our jails.

Finally, Sheriffs have a wide mixture of policing and public safety responsibilities given the diverse geographic and demographic makeup of our counties. Sheriffs across the country represent both very rural areas and their particular dynamics – as well as very urban areas.

All of these responsibilities and experiences allow us to provide a unique set of observations regarding the key issues identified by the Task Force.

Sheriffs can speak to all the topics highlighted by the Task Force, but we understand the ‘*community engagement and dialogue*’ area very well, simply given our position in the community. We have a firsthand understanding of the importance of positive community relations and the role that these relations play in solving crime and building safer communities. In fact, we couldn’t do our jobs without the support, engagement and cooperation of the public.

That said, any improvement in the area of police-community relations will only occur with a bilateral commitment from both law enforcement **and** the community. This cannot be a “one-way” conversation where only law enforcement agencies are expected to change.

Important to note is that all communities are different. The bond between law enforcement and the general public varies greatly across the country. In some areas, the dynamics between law enforcement and the community are excellent.

Unfortunately, in other communities, the dynamics are not as positive – and work needs to be done. In these areas however, breakdowns or gaps between the community and law enforcement are not solely due to the actions of those wearing a badge. Those communities have a responsibility to adjust as well.

Any serious national conversation on the topic of improving community engagement and dialogue needs to recognize these facts.

Strengthening law enforcement-community relations must include better highlighting of the challenges and dangers of the law enforcement profession. Quite frankly, there is not enough informed public awareness regarding the daily life of the average officer on patrol.

Just for context, according to the Officer Down Memorial Page, 121 officers died in the line of duty in 2014, roughly one officer every three days. 47 of them were killed by gunfire. And, according to data from the FBI, since 2004, at least 50,000 officers have been assaulted annually.

Our jobs are filled with uncertainty, violence and hostility every day. And, we have to make split-second decisions that are often life-impacting. Training and incident review go a long way in establishing best practices and preparedness. But in real-life, things can change in a heartbeat that even the best training can’t account for.

Sheriffs also recognize a need for better public understanding of how the entire criminal justice system works. For the average American, the officer on patrol is the most direct and visible point of contact between the citizenry and the entire criminal justice system.

But law enforcement is only one part – we don’t write laws or define sentencing guidelines.

Recent incidents questioned by the public could have been clarified if there was a more accurate understanding of how the entire criminal justice system works. This would also help to clarify or “*define the role of police in a democratic society,*” an identified concern of the Task Force.

The solution to these challenges is not the responsibility of one group and will require national leaders with a louder pulpit to reinforce the messaging conducted by law enforcement professionals at the State and local levels.

Moving forward, Sheriffs would like to offer several recommendations to address some of the concerns identified by the Task Force – as well as some additional concerns that need to be addressed in the context of 21st Century Policing.

1. To promote **community engagement and dialogue**, specific areas where initiatives were designed to strengthen police-community bonds could be analyzed and cross-applied to other areas experiencing similar problems. Also, citizens should be encouraged to participate in law enforcement initiatives designed to educate the public, such as ride-alongs or training invitations – or get involved in programs like Neighborhood Watch, sponsored by the National Sheriffs’ Association (NSA). Participation in reserve police officer programs or organizations like the National Citizens Police Academy Association (NCPAA) are additional ways that allow citizens to interact more closely with law enforcement and gain a more personal stake in community safety.
2. On **improving police and youth relations**, we would suggest more routine interaction between schools and police, particularly in distressed areas. This would allow students to interact with local law enforcement in a more regular manner to help build trust. Local school districts could coordinate with law enforcement to conduct educational visits to police departments that may foster interest in the law enforcement profession at an earlier age.
3. To help **define the role of police in a democratic society** and to help build community-police relations, Sheriffs would recommend that a national discussion be undertaken to help increase public awareness of what the job of law enforcement truly entails and how the criminal justice system fully works. Understanding the diversity of criminality across the Nation will help to clarify why relations between law enforcement and certain communities are the way they are. Greater awareness of these realities would also give the public a better understanding of **why** law enforcement officers use certain equipment and tactics or ask the public to comply with certain procedures. These tools and tactics serve a purpose: **To protect the officer and to enhance the safety of the public, including the safety of individuals undergoing arrest or detention.** Understanding this would actually help to mitigate confrontation between law enforcement and the public. It would also reduce confusion and escalation on either the part of the officer or the public.

4. Finally, Sheriffs must reemphasize the need for stability and consistency at the Federal level on initiatives and funding designed to assist State and local law enforcement. All of the issues discussed here today would be addressed – in part – if various grant programs like MIOTCRA, Byrne JAG, COPS, SCAAP and other forms of support were at least consistent year over year. Extreme fluctuations in the funding of key programs have a detrimental impact on daily policing, officer and public safety – because they ultimately determine budgetary outlays that decide how much for workforce hiring, community relations initiatives, training, equipment procurement, technology improvement, administrative efficiency, counseling services and other key areas that ensure a modern and effective police force.

In closing, Sheriffs hope that forums like this listening session and the Task Force will prove to be a way in which National leaders can help to broadcast our ideas and suggestions to a wider audience. We look forward to future opportunities to help address these concerns – but we would stress that National leaders

I would like to add that we hope this event will lead to more regular and open discussions between Law Enforcement Leaders across the country and policymakers here in DC. The topics discussed here today are critically important – for both the law enforcement community and for the general public.

Thank you and I look forward to any questions that you may have.