

# Reporter's Notebook: Legislators Respond to Outcry over Law Enforcement and Discrimination

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Easton's members of the Connecticut General Assembly have been moved by recent events and protests to take strong public stands on behalf of equal protection under the law for all people.

State Rep. Anne Hughes, D-Easton, Redding, Weston, has said that the public outcry over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis should be "be channeled by legislators for policy changes" because Connecticut has "its own legacy of deadly police violence and lack of accountability."

State Sen. Tony Hwang, R- Easton, Fairfield, Newtown Westport, has said that his "heart and conscience are with any individual who has experienced bigotry. I stand with you and will always fight for you against hate and violence. We need to find solutions to issues that have led to hate and violence."

Hughes cited the fact that there have been 21 deadly outcomes in police encounters over the past five years, 16 of which have been resolved without criminal charges. Five cases remain open in investigations by state attorneys.

Use of excessive police force is not simply the work of “bad apples,” according to Hughes. “It’s how some police see their job. We need to take a hard look at the systemic level,” she said, with reference to an expected, upcoming special session of the state legislature.

“Progress toward trust and understanding must be the goal. We all need to collaborate to find solutions,” according to Hwang. He cited as an example of collaboration his co-sponsorship last year of legislation that among other things requires the police to release body or dashboard videos within 96-hours when requested in use-of-force incidents.

The most recent incident involved a 27-year-old man who was fatally shot in April outside his mother’s home as a police SWAT team was assisting the Department of Correction in serving a violation of parole warrant. No weapon was found on or near the victim. His death is still under investigation. The four officers who opened fire on the victim are on administrative leave.

In January, a state police trooper shot a 19-year-old West Haven man seven times after chasing him on a stolen vehicle charge. Camera film showed the trooper firing through a closed driver-side window of a car that was blocked by state police vehicles. The trooper claimed that the suspect had a knife. A state attorney is conducting an investigation of the incident with inspectors from the Division of Criminal Justice having been added after officials removed state police detectives from the investigation.

Eliminating or reducing the qualified immunity police officers enjoy in civil lawsuits would be one way Hughes thinks justice would be better served. Advocates claim that the possibility of more civil-trial awards of monetary damages would motivate municipalities to limit the use of excessive force by police officers at least for budgetary considerations, if for no higher reasons.

“We need to implement procedures that emphasize empathy, mental health, and de-

escalation. Law enforcement culture must be examined and reformed to align with science-based best practices and person-centered judgement of what is right and wrong, not if a person is good or bad,” said Hwang whose co-sponsored legislation, he said, also prohibits “shooting into fleeing vehicles without the imminent threat of death to another person.”

“I don’t worry about being stopped by the police. The system is for me,” Hughes said about the fear black communities have of the police and the frustration they experience in their search for justice. Now she says that “people who benefit from the system need to decide what to give in return” for those not being well served by law enforcement.

“I cannot presume to fathom the myriad of emotions and frustrations that so many African-Americans must be experiencing, and I cannot erase the incredible wrongs that have resurrected problems our country has battled since its creation,” said Hwang. “I can, however, offer an ear to listen, eyes to see and a strong voice to help move our country in a better direction.”