

Editorial: APD review shouldn't start from scratch

By American-Statesman Editorial Board

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A thorough review of the Austin Police Department's hiring, training and policing practices is badly needed — particularly in the wake of disturbing allegations that former assistant chief Justin Newsom used the n-word with colleagues, amplifying long-standing concerns of racial bias at the agency.

Such an inquiry need not start from scratch, however.

As the Austin City Council considers a resolution this week calling for a sweeping investigation of APD, it should direct staff to draw on several reviews already in the works. Doing so would help the city fix some problems quickly — and, we hope, prevent unnecessary delays in organizing future police academy classes.

The resolution by Council Member Natasha Harper-Madison calls for two investigative tracks:

- An audit by city staff of APD's hiring and training practices, to be completed by June 2020.
- A comprehensive review by an independent consultant looking at officer communications, training materials, use of force and possible bias in hiring or policing practices, with a final report due by December 2021.

Both lines of inquiry are important steps toward fixing problems and improving public confidence in APD, both critical to public safety. As we've previously noted, APD's ability to prevent and solve crimes relies heavily on the public's trust that police officers are being professional and even-handed.

City officials don't need to reinvent the wheel with the first inquiry, though. Council members should look to expedite the audit by city staff by drawing from studies already underway, including:

- A report being drafted by Austin's Equity Office, which conducted an equity assessment of APD that includes a review of the department's recruiting and training divisions.
- An analysis of the police academy being finalized by Sarah Villanueva, APD's newly hired organizational development and training manager, who specializes in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- An examination by the City Auditor's Office into APD's compliance with dozens of recommendations from a 2016 report by the Mannix Consulting Group, which outlined steps for APD to improve its community policing efforts.

By gathering information from these reports, city staffers could avoid duplicating work, and they would gain different valuable perspectives on APD's efforts.

More importantly, drawing from this body of work could help the city move more quickly toward making any immediate changes that are needed, even as the independent consultant works on the more exhaustive review due in 2021.

Timeliness is essential here. The council should press for the information it needs without significantly delaying future police academy classes.

Harper-Madison's resolution calls for no new cadet classes to be initiated until the audit by city staff is finished. But she emphasized to us that the next police academy, scheduled to start Feb. 18, should still be held for the cadets who have already been accepted. We agree: Those cadets have made plans based on promises from APD, and the agency could face recruiting difficulties down the line if it walks back offers made to these aspiring officers.

Harper-Madison's resolution would likely push back another cadet class, scheduled to start June 8, to sometime in the fall.

We share her concern about identifying and addressing the factors leading to high dropout rates from APD's police academy: Nearly 40% of the latest class left the program early. And improved training is clearly needed, with various studies raising red flags about APD — showing that Austin police are more likely to use force in areas where blacks and Hispanics live, use greater levels of force against minorities, and are twice as likely to search a person of color during a traffic stop. Looking at the 15 largest U.S. cities, Austin has the highest rate of police shootings of people with mental health problems.

At the same time, the city should approach its review expeditiously. APD has about 170 vacancies today, with more coming through retirements, resignations or departures for other jobs. New recruits are needed to keep the agency properly staffed.

The council must balance competing needs: Pushing for necessary reforms at APD while supporting the staffing needs of a vital public safety agency. The best path forward starts with keeping the February cadet academy, and building on studies already in the works to quickly identify the changes APD needs.