

Chief Sydney Roberts, Civilian Office of Police Accountability Opening Remarks – Budget Hearing 2020

Good Morning Madame Chairman Dowell, Vice Chair Silverstein and members of City Council. I am Sydney Roberts, the Chief Administrator for the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA). Before I begin, I would like to introduce my staff who are on camera: First Deputy, Karlo Flowers, Chief of Investigative Operations, Andrea Kersten, General Counsel, Kevin Connor, and Public Information Officer, Ephraim Eaddy.

I am honored to have the opportunity to present our 2021 Budget, talk about the work of COPA and answer any questions you may have.

It was over 2 years ago that I sat before you in my confirmation hearing expressing that police accountability, specifically ensuring that officers carried out their duties in a lawful and procedurally just manner, was personal to me. It is still personal to me and as I have come to know my staff, it is personal for them. And while we conduct the business of COPA in a fair and unbiased manner, the importance of the work we do is never lost on any of us. COPA has an amazing staff and I am proud of their commitment.

That commitment could not have been more prevalent then in this past year. COPA, like all city agencies faced challenges that neither it, nor its predecessor bodies had ever faced, the COVID Pandemic. It altered the way we live, work and interact with each other and the constituents we serve. Through it all, our resolve as an agency and commitment to respond to the residents of this city and deliver on our mandate, to provide civilian oversight of the Chicago Police Department, has not wavered.

In COPA's short tenure, through the adoption of sound investigative practices, the incorporation of legal review by staff attorneys and training rooted in investigative best practices, COPA has enhanced the integrity of our investigative conclusions, overcoming a criticism by the Department of Justice in the 2017 review of predecessor oversight bodies. In 2019 and through the first three quarters of 2020, COPA's 42% sustained rate, which determines officers violated Department policy, exceeds that of its predecessor body by more than 10%. COPA has also closed nearly twice as many cases following a full investigation than its predecessor body.

Also raised in the DOJ's report were concerns that evidence of an officer's lack of candor or engaging in the code of silence were overlooked have been addressed – the number of officers determined to have lied and/or engaged in the code of silence has increased by 40% since 2016. We would be remiss if we did not also acknowledge that through our investigative efforts, we have also provided credible investigative reports exonerating officers of misconduct and engaging in the proper use of force, including deadly force.

As a result of protests following the killing of Mr. George Floyd, and the civil unrest witnessed in Chicago and nationally, COPA received an unprecedented number of just over 400 complaints within a two-week time period, formed a specialized team of investigative personnel to commence immediate investigation of the most egregious complaints and coordinated with local and federal law enforcement entities for those matters rising to the level of criminal violations. To enhance public transparency, COPA swiftly launched a new data portal which provides investigative updates and information on protest related complaints.

We have been more transparent by releasing video and other materials in more than 300 incidents and engaged numerous community groups, high schools, young people, clergy, activists, impacted families, colleges and universities, and you, the aldermen.

I want to pause at this moment to thank the community for their continued trust in bringing complaints to our agency, officers for their cooperation, community stakeholders, witnesses, activist for their partnerships.

I also want to thank you, the aldermen. Your partnership has allowed us to better engage with your constituents and provided the platform from which we are able to speak directly to Chicagoans across this city. From hosting town halls, to offering your offices as locations to meet with potential witnesses, sharing information regarding our investigations, forwarding complaints, arranging meetings with impacted families and engaging in substantive public conversations – this is a model for what true community engagement looks like and it speaks volumes to the progress COPA has made and the trust we have built. COPA is not the civilian oversight body of Chicago's past and I extend my personal thanks to you for supporting COPA as we continue this journey to improve Chicago's police accountability system. Police accountability requires all of us to lean in, and you have stepped up yet again on behalf of the residents of this city. These are proud moments when we are grateful to be a part of Chicago's layered accountability system, delivering to the city the objective, fair and effective oversight and engagement the residents deserve on this long road of reform.

In these three years, we have experienced challenges and, in every instance have made the necessary adjustments to meet our mandates and strengthen the public's trust. The progress made and the lessons learned give us confidence about our future and Chicago's standing as a leader in civilian oversight around the country.

We have created and developed more deliberate strategies to manage our workload. In an effort to address our emerging priorities and expand our efforts to improve the Department's policing practices, we have created new positions of Chief of Investigative Operations, Directors of Investigation, and a new unit, the Policy Research & Analysis Division. . We have worked closely with our Community Advisory Council – a cross section of Chicagoans who assist COPA in aligning with the needs of the community - and recently we developed a community policy working group to provide feedback and recommendations on COPA policies before submission to the federal monitors.

COPA reflects the people of this City. We reside in nearly every community, we are diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. We have been impacted by police misconduct, we are members of the Gold Star families, advocates for social justice and former members of the law enforcement community.

We are proud of the progress COPA has made. We are conducting integrity-based investigations, holding officers accountable, providing recommendations to improve policing and building trust amongst the community.

We thank you for your continued support and welcome your comments and questions.