



THE MONTANA
RACIAL EQUITY
PROJECT



Rachel Harlow-Schalk, City Manager
City of Helena
316 North Park Avenue
Helena, MT 59623
Via E-mail: rschalk@helenamt.gov

May 18, 2021

Dear Rachel Harlow-Schalk:

The Montana Racial Equity Project (MTREP) and ACLU of Montana have serious concerns regarding the City of Helena's School Resource Officer (SRO) MOU Working Group. The original stated purpose of this group was to have a robust discussion surrounding the purpose and utility of having SROs in Helena school district. Our experience at the initial Working Group meeting is that there is no interest in such a robust discussion and that the decision to keep the existing model of SROs in schools has already been made.

Last summer, hundreds of Helena citizens protested the horrific killing of George Floyd and sought meaningful police reform measures in Helena. Additionally, there were intense community discussions regarding school resource officers during July's City Council meeting. There was approximately 50% support for the current SRO model and 50% opposition to the current SRO model. Consequently, further discussion at the City Council level was deferred, and this Working Group was formed to study the issue and consider various perspectives.

However, given the current composition of the City of Helena's School Resource Officer MOU Working Group, it is clear that only the pro-SRO perspective is being valued. The meeting we attended was stacked with pro-SRO leaning committee members, even though we know, based on public comment at July's SRO commission meeting, that is not reflective of community opinion on SROs in Helena schools. Additionally, the Working Group consists of 27 members. There is very little time for meaningful conversation given the large group and only three remaining one and one-half hour meetings.

MTREP and ACLU of Montana will no longer attend meetings unless the composition of the Working Group is substantially changed and the subject of discussion is expanded to allow for a more robust exploration of the role and purpose of SROs in Helena schools. We specifically ask for you to change the make-up of the Working Group to reflect the publicly voiced opinions of July 2020's Helena City Council meeting by reducing the committee from 27 members down to 15, with at least half of the members opposed to having SROs in schools. We request that at least two representatives from those members opposed to SROs be involved in decision making related to the Working Group meetings, such as input

in topics of discussion and agenda setting. We also ask for the topic of the removal of SROs from schools to be seriously considered by the Working Group. Until these important changes to the Working Group are made, no meaningful discussion can be had in providing feedback and suggestions to the City of Helena regarding SROs and their impact upon children. If these changes are not made, you will not only lose the engagement of ACLU of Montana and MTREP, but you will also lose the voice of the only three Black women on the committee.

MTREP is led by Judith Heilman, a now retired veteran police detective sergeant in charge of the Body Crimes Unit, who supervised SROs for three years. Judith Heilman is the Executive Director of the only Black-founded, Black-led, and all BIPOC staffed non-profit organization in Montana. She brings both law enforcement and BIPOC experience to the Working Group. Courtney Smith is an attorney and the Criminal Justice Initiative Lead with MTREP who has worked in civil rights issues for five years. She brings both her professional and personal lived experiences as a Black woman to this Working Group discussion.

Akilah Lane is a staff attorney at the ACLU of Montana and a Helena resident. She is also mother to two students currently enrolled in Helena Public Schools. She has personal experience on how the criminalization of students can negatively impact their school outcomes and lead to dropout, especially for BIPOC students.

The importance of meaningfully including the perspectives of BIPOC members on the committee cannot be overstated. In Helena Public Schools, BIPOC students are disproportionately subjected to in-school suspension and out-of-school suspensions relative to their enrollment. For example, at Capital High School, Native, Black, and Latinx students were more than twice as likely as White students to face in-school suspension. Students of two or more races were three times as likely to face in-school suspension. At Capital High School BIPOC students and students with disabilities are also more likely to face out-of-school suspensions. These types of disparities in punishment cause irreparable harm to students.

In order to move forward, Helena's School Resource Officer MOU Working Group must be representative of the views of the citizenry, and we must be able to engage in meaningful dialogue. We, in addition to many other concerned and dedicated Helena residents, are committed to providing Helena students with the safest, most inclusive learning environment for all students. In order to reach that goal, it is imperative that we have open discourse surrounding the use of SROs in Helena schools and that members of impacted groups are brought to the table to engage in relevant and purposeful discussion. We ask that you respond to this letter in advance of the May 25th meeting, informing us of a specific plan to rectify the issues stated above.

Sincerely,

Judith Heilman, Executive Director, MTREP
Courtney Smith, Criminal Justice Initiative Lead, MTREP
Akilah Lane, Staff Attorney ACLU of Montana