Genesee County Police Reform and Reinvention Report

On June 12, 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed Executive Order 203 requiring each local government with a policing agency to adopt a policing reform plan by April 1, 2021. In a transmittal document dated August 2020, the Governor proposed four questions to be addressed in the reform plan:

➢ What Functions Should Police Perform
➢ Employing Smart and Effective Policing Standards and Strategies
➢ Fostering Community-Oriented Leadership, Culture and Accountability
➢ Recruiting and Supporting Excellent Personnel

In response to Executive Order 203, the Genesee County Legislature appointed a committee of 20 stakeholders representing a wide variety of backgrounds. The committee met nine times, and all but the initial two meetings were held virtually with members addressing the various issues seriously and openly to a variety of input. Attachment A is a list of the members.

Genesee County demographics according to the 2019 US Census Bureau states that Genesee County, NY, has a population of 57,280 people.
- 92.9% White
- 3.2% Black
- 3.5% Hispanic
- 2.0% two or more races
- 1.2% American Indian
- 0.7% Asian
- It should be noted that individuals with a preferred language other than English are 3.7%
- 10.5% are disabled that are under the age of 65
- 10.2% are living in poverty

Attachment B is the January 2021, demographic summary of the Sheriff’s Office personnel.

Before addressing the specific questions put before the committee, there are some very basic points that overlay all four questions and should be acknowledged.

A. The sheriff, undersheriff, and various other members of the department that met with the committee were all open to the process and provided all information requested in a timely manner.

B. Training is not considered an “event” by the Sheriff’s Office but an ongoing process to address specific needs as they arise and the professional environment changes.

C. The NYS Municipal Police Training Council (MPTC) develops model policies on various aspects of police operations. The Genesee County Sheriff’s Office readily adopts these policies and adapts them to local needs as required.
D. The NYS Law Enforcement Agency Accreditation Council (LEAAC) sets standards for law enforcement agencies seeking accreditation. Accreditation is not mandatory and requires a significant effort by a policing agency seeking accreditation. Less than one-quarter of the law enforcement agencies in the state meets the requirements. The Genesee County Sheriff’s Office has met these standards for the past 20 years and in December 2020, was re-accredited for another five years.

E. Discussion and reviewing policing in Genesee County has been actively pursued through the Criminal Justice Advisory Council (CJAC). CJAC includes representatives from all policing agencies in the county, including state agencies, judicial representatives, various local agencies and private citizens. CJAC meets on a monthly basis where members discuss needs and issues relating to the criminal justice system in Genesee County.

F. The mission of the Genesee County Sheriff’s office is to provide public service and protection to the citizens of the community. The responsibilities associated with this Mission are many. They include:

- the enforcement of all federal, state and local laws
- maintaining peace and order in the county
- protecting property and personal safety
- providing professional public safety dispatching services, animal control
- generally assisting citizens in need.
- providing a safe and secure jail - ensuring proper care, custody, treatment, supervision and discipline for all persons committed to the custody of the Sheriff
- properly receive and execute any and all legal civil processes referred to the Office of the Sheriff

The members of the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office are expected to carry out these responsibilities diligently, courteously and professionally; and to take pride in the service they provide.

In response to the specific questions raised in Executive Order 203, the following are the findings and recommendations of the Genesee County Police Reform and Reinvention Committee.

What Functions Should Police Perform?

Findings: The law enforcement agencies in Genesee County work very closely together.

- They operate under the “closest car” concept to assist with the most-timely response
- the 911 Emergency Services Dispatch Center serves as the county-wide Public Safety Answering Point
- all law enforcement agencies are represented at CJAC
- The Sheriff’s Office:
  - works closely with human services agencies in the county to address new and changing residents’ needs.
  - has worked with Genesee County school superintendents and principals to achieve the assignment of a School Resource Officer (SRO) in its district.
  - offers numerous outreach programs to identify and address societal issues
Lastly, Genesee County is fortunate to have two relatively unique programs under the direction of the Sheriff’s Office; the Justice for Children Advocacy Center (JFCAC) and Genesee Justice.

The Justice for Children Advocacy Center offers a unique, comprehensive approach to services for children who have been sexually or physically abused, or who have been a witness to violence. The JFCAC serves as a "one-stop shop" for children, families, and professionals by bringing everyone together in a warm, safe, and child-friendly location. It is the agency's philosophy that children who have been victimized should not be re-victimized by the very system which is in place to protect them. Thus, the goal of the JFCAC is to improve the response to child abuse by eliminating multiple interviews and examinations of children. The JFCAC’s goal is to provide quick access to mental health, victim advocacy, and support services for children and families and enhance multidisciplinary communication and coordination between agencies. The JFCAC also helps to reduce financial barriers by offering its services for free. Moreover, the centralized location in the city of Batavia and its two satellite offices located in Albion (Orleans County) and Warsaw (Wyoming County) provides for easier access for those with transportation barriers.

Genesee Justice is an alternative-to-incarceration (ATI) and victims’ assistance program. The mission of the Genesee County Criminal Justice System “is to promote public good and safety by seeking solutions to crime, which preserve life, protect property, and hold those who violate public trust accountable and give standing to victims. This is accomplished through community participation, crime prevention, education, and by monitoring and assessing the Criminal Justice System itself.”

The Police assisted addiction and recovery initiative (PAARI) provides training, strategic guidance, support and resources to help law enforcement agencies nationwide create non-arrest pathways to treatment and recovery. Individuals with a substance use disorder are able to seek treatment without fear of being incarcerated and the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office will be able to coordinate with local recovery and treatment agencies to help with these individuals in crisis.

**Recommendations:** Major areas of concern are mental health and substance abuse and the various ways it presents itself in our community. Currently, there is a strong opinion that programs to address these concerns need to be expanded and further programs developed. It is recommended by the committee that a major area of focus should be the availability of mental health professionals available to assist the 911 Emergency Services Dispatch Center, road patrol officers, and the county jail. Recommendations include working with Genesee County Mental Health, Genesee County Alcohol and Substance Abuse (GCASA) along with other mental health and substance abuse professionals to train, advise, and work in tandem with the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office. The cost associated with expanded programs would require a funding source to be identified. Reallocation of funds would not be feasible at the present time.
Employing Smart and Effective Policing Standards and Strategies

Findings: Genesee County is a rural county, and many of the issues discussed in this section are not relevant. The most important issue discussed was the inappropriate use of the Sheriff’s Office. As stated above, the Sheriff’s Office is accredited and, therefore, meets the standards set by the NYS Law Enforcement Agency Accreditation Council (LEAAC). Regarding the operations of the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office, there were no concerns/comments received by the committee that the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office, on a routine basis, is taking inappropriate actions. One area of specific concern that was reviewed by the committee was the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office’s use of force standards and number of incidents involving the use of force. The findings were, over the past three years, the use of force incidents averaged 10 per year.

As discussed previously, the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office is an accredited agency and was recently reaccredited in December 2020. One of the standards for accreditation is officer accountability. There were no findings indicating a lack of accountability. There is a policy in place that requires a review of any action deemed inappropriate and, if confirmed, the officer is held accountable.

Genesee County is located between the two metropolitan areas of Rochester and Buffalo. The NYS Thruway runs through the center of the county with three exits, therefore, the county’s rural demographics do not adequately represent the true nature of policing in the county. Working with other law enforcement agencies, the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office stays abreast of related activities.

Recommendations: Although there are no significant issues at the present time, the Sheriff’s Office must be vigilant and prepared to address any issues and citizen concerns that may arise.

Although the problems in a rural setting may not be as significant as those in an urban area, the interaction with underserved, individually or in a group, should be monitored through the use of body camera footage and appropriate training provided. How and when law enforcement interacts with individuals needs to be consistent and not determined by race.

The committee recommends that a consumer hotline/citizen comment form be set up through various accessible means so that individuals in the community, and employees, can have a safe place to air grievances, comments, concerns, or acknowledgements. These submissions will be reviewed by the command staff of the Sheriff’s Office in a culturally sensitive and timely manner.

Fostering Community-Oriented Leadership, Culture and Accountability

Findings: Addressing these issues could be the most challenging and most rewarding for the Sheriff’s Office.

The sheriff, and by extension the undersheriff, is an elected position serving a four-year term. The voters, therefore, have final say on the leadership of the Office. Although the position is not often contested, it was recently in 2020, and in the past,
the incumbent has lost. On a daily basis, local media reports on Sheriff’s Office activities. The Sheriff’s Office is as transparent as safely and practical as possible. The leadership makes significant efforts to reach out to the community through a variety of programs including School Resource Officers, tip lines, small community group meetings, and the general availability of officers for community interactions and events.

Genesee County has a population of 3.7% that has a preferred language that is not English. This is a barrier for officers when encountering these individuals and also a barrier for individuals encountering the officers. In order to overcome these barriers, the Sheriff’s Office uses a certified interpretive service. Because of these services, those that have a preferred language other than English, now have access to a service that enables communication with the Sheriff’s Office.

**Recommendations:** The committee recommends that Genesee County Sheriff’s Office develop a comprehensive training plan that includes implicit bias, trauma informed care and vicarious trauma training, mental health, and state-mandated trainings. This training plan will include what type of trainings, times, cost, attendees, and frequency. Genesee County Sheriff’s Office must be transparent to the public on its training activities. Genesee County Sheriff’s Office should collaborate with local agencies and professional trainers to incorporate trainings into their agencies.

**Recruiting and Supporting Excellent Personnel**

**Findings:** Genesee County, NY demographics include a population that consists of 92.9% White, 3.2% Black, 3.5% Hispanic and 2.0% two or more races. The application process consists of passing a civil service exam, physical fitness exam, and an in-depth background check. In addition, because civil service laws control most aspects of the employment process, there are limitations on what actions the department can take. This is a huge obstacle and deters those from underserved populations from applying.

**Recommendations:** The Genesee County Sheriff’s Office should review its recruitment program and identify any programs or agencies available, such as the Genesee County Career Center or Veterans’ Outreach Program that may assist in their efforts. It is also recommended that the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office work with the Superintendents of Genesee County Schools, Principal of Notre Dame HS, and officials at Genesee Community College to expand its current programs of recruiting and educating students, especially those in underserved populations, on a career in law enforcement.

The third recommendation is to have the County Legislature and senior management take an active role in supporting reforms to the civil service law being proposed by a variety of organizations in NYS to make it more equitable and fair.

In closing, the committee wishes to thank Sheriff William A. Sheron, Jr., Undersheriff Bradley D. Mazur, and the various members of the Genesee County Sheriff’s Office for the active participation and cooperation in this process. As Sheriff Sheron stated on numerous occasions, he and his department personnel all recognize there is more that can be done to better the Office
and are always willing to listen and address issues and needs. Genesee County residents can take pride in their Sheriff’s Office and the service they are providing.

Attachment A: Committee Members
Rochelle M. Stein  Legislature Chair
Greg Post  Town Supervisor
William Sheron  Sheriff
Bradley Mazur  Undersheriff
Howard Carlson  Deputy Sheriff-Youth Officer
L. Matthew Landers  County Manager
Laura Belluscio Williams
John Keller  Pastor
Perez Dinkins  Citizen
Tyrone Woods  Citizen
Julie Carasone  Consultant and Certified Trainer
Rachel Gelabale  College Student
Justina Garner  Domestic Abuse Counselor
Leandro Mateos  Farm Laborer
Barb Starowitz  Farm Operator/Owner
Lynda Battaglia  Mental Health Director
John Bennett  Addictions Agency Director
Jerry Ader  Public Defender
Lawrence Friedman  District Attorney
Robert Bausch  Citizen & Former Legislative Chair

Attachment B: Demographic breakdown of the Sheriff’s Office personnel (Road Patrol, Jail, Dispatch, Genesee Justice, Justice for Children Advocacy Center).

There are currently 137 employees (this number does not include any current vacancies that need to be filled).

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