

# D.C. police, Howard University to host community forums on law enforcement

By **Peter Hermann**



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D.C. police are partnering with Howard University to hold public listening sessions to improve relationships with residents amid efforts to de-emphasize arrests and pursue a public health approach to fighting crime.

The first of what are being called community engagement webinars is scheduled for April 21 from 7 to 8:30 p.m. There will be different sessions in each of the District's eight wards.

Acting police chief Robert J. Contee III will participate in the programs, along with Bahiyyah M. Muhammad, a criminology professor at Howard, and other staffers from the university.

Muhammad founded Howard's Policing Inside Out program, in which police officers and District residents attend class together to discuss law enforcement practices and social justice issues to improve dialogue and trust.

Contee, whom the D.C. Council could approve as permanent chief later this month, has said he wants to meet with residents from across the city as he assesses a long list of proposed changes recently put forward by a group tasked by the council to examine the practices of the police department.

That group, the Police Reform Commission, is recommending sweeping changes to police operations and tactics, eliminating some duties altogether and reducing the agency's size and budget. It is an attempt to reimagine policing amid calls for social and racial justice following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis police custody last year.

The chairman of the D.C. Council's public safety committee, Charles Allen (D-Ward 6), is seeking alternatives to policing, such as sending health professionals and counselors to calls for people suffering mental distress.

Contee has said "the voices of the community have to weigh in to this conversation," adding he wants to know from residents what they want and don't want police to be doing. The chief also has said he wants to tailor police engagement to individual neighborhoods, saying the priorities of residents may differ from one area to another.

A team put together by Muhammad will recruit "a diverse array of voices for each session."

Members of the public can register for the first event here.

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