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Statement of Easton Mayor Sal Panto to Easton City Council – June 10, 2020

During the last few weeks, our City Administration has been extremely busy. First COVID pandemic; then our Business Recovery Plan to re-open our economy; then a Haz Mat situation and more. But the toughest issue that we are need to resolve, once and for all, is this country's issue of systemic racism; not just because of the murder of George Floyd but because of the light it has shown once again on the generational impacts of systemic racism.

While we are witnessing, sharing, and experiencing more pain than any time I can remember, and I grew up in the 60's, there is also reason for hope. People are rising in cities across our nation to speak out, to protest and to demand change.

We need to build community, peacefully protesting, and calling for an end to police violence -- **where it exists** -- and the systemic structures that perpetuate it.

I am grateful for all those who peacefully marched and protested in Easton. By the thousands, we have seen people march most of which were peaceful. But as we all know, words hurt too and some of the rhetoric against our police and the remarks and hand gestures were totally uncalled for against our department. Our police showed true professionalism as they were taunted to react by individuals. The rally leaders did nothing to stop the unpeaceful rhetoric.

This has been an incredibly painful two weeks for our country. One that is shining the light on hundreds of years of racism and injustice that has haunted our past and continues to our present. It is time to eradicate it from our future. It is a moment that summons all of us – including me – to do more and to do better.

While painful, because the trauma and impacts of systemic racism are both immediate and generations deep – I have deeply appreciated those conversations and their willingness to have them.

I believe we truly can as one person said to me, build true, lasting generational justice and change.

We need to bring the same intensity and make the same commitment to cure the illness of racism that we have brought to stopping the spread of COVID-19.

While officers have been working under difficult conditions, de-escalation should be the number one priority and our Easton officers have been trained in de-escalation. De-escalation is critical in every interaction officers have – from individual actions to crowd management.

I want to be clear with you – as I have with the Chief – what my expectations are for the police department. We made a lot of progress over the last 13 years. But we must work toward continuous improvement to ensure justice and equity for all of our residents.

These aren't just my expectations; they are the expectations of our community and, frankly, the expectations and core values that are embedded in EPD's policies and officers' training. Most importantly, I know they are also the core values of Chief Scalzo.

The Department of Justice investigated the Easton PD just before I took office in 2008. This investigation was because of the unconstitutional use of excessive force. As Mayor, it is now my job to make sure that we stay committed to the policies and procedures that we have in place and to the Accreditation Certification that we received.

Cultural reform is what is most enduring, and we have built on that reform not only having the policies in place, but also having the fortitude to enforce those policies with discipline, including termination.

We have an opportunity to build on the lasting systemic changes that can transform policing and the department. The new Easton PD has shown itself to be a department that leads with de-escalation and does not use force unless it is necessary.

We have accountability systems that work and have proven effective; most recently we won a court appeal of a former police officer.

I also must be held accountable, and I must hold Chief Scalzo and the Department accountable.

I know that not every decision I make is always the right one, so my actions should be scrutinized also.

The actions both Chief Scalzo, me and our local elected officials have taken are always for the interest of the residents of Easton – ALL of the residents.

I know that safety was shattered for many by images, sounds and gas more fitting of a war zone; ***but that was not here in Easton.*** Our city did not look like a military zone. Officers were dressed in their normal uniforms, not riot gear. But they also have to respond to the reality on the ground to keep the officers and public safe; our officers have the training to know that their job is to not escalate.

To all those who came peacefully and exercised their constitutional right to protest you are welcomed in our city and I support your cause to finally put an end to systemic racism in our society.

To the actions of the handful of individuals seemingly intent on inciting violence between police and a small number of demonstrators with their signs, rhetoric and gestures – we will not allow you to discredit the law-abiding citizens who are peacefully protesting and we won't allow you to break the law.

We are listening to the members of our community who have taken to the streets to call for a better city and a better country. I believe our record proves this to be the case not only of the leadership but the entire police department.

The help of those on the frontline to maintain the peace is instrumental in ensuring everyone remains safe I ask that demonstration leaders speak to those who aren't displaying the peaceful protest and are displaying unacceptable behavior -- please hold those folks accountable. I want to thank NAACP President Lance Wheeler for doing this on several occasions.

Our shared goal is to keep everyone safe and we also have an obligation not to let the message of why the rallies are held be drowned out by a few.

But George Floyd's murder is not the only reason thousands of people are taking to the streets. People are protesting a culture of systemic racism and police actions that exists in this country. Those killings remind us of the profound injustice of how they were failed by the system. We must do more to eradicate systemic racism from our society.

They are also protesting a culture of some that will use force before de-escalation, and they're protesting a culture that perpetuates systemic inequities that impact people of color.

People are rightfully protesting how we can be better as a society and make real changes, so I want to talk about what we have done in Easton.

When recruiting officers for the civil service test more than 150 notices are sent to minority organizations and individuals in the region. This year the fire department also started an Academy at the Boys and Girls Club to get young adults interested in being a firefighter.

The Easton Police Department has been for some time equipped with both body cameras and in-car cameras deployed during all citizen contacts. The policy of the Easton Police Department is that cameras are to be initiated during calls for service while engaging with the public and shall not be turned off until the incident is complete, and the officer is no longer engaged with those involved.

Training is an essential component of the success of any police agency. The Easton Police Department trains its officers every year on the issues of diversity both in the workplace and in dealing with the community. Some of the training that every single Easton Police Officer received last year was:

Cultural Awareness; Anti-harassment in the workplace; Anti-bias training for law enforcement; De-escalation in minimizing the force; Ethics in law enforcement; Civil Rights; Arrest Search and Seizure; Communication Skills

This training is just a sampling of the training our officers receive every single year and will continue to do so in the future. In 2018 every officer attended a cultural competence training conducted by Intersect Alliance, which lead by instructor Guillermo Lopez. This instruction was conducted over the course of several months and consisted of several "ride-along" conversations, in-class training, and role-playing exercises. The Easton Police Department takes the responsibility of community relations extremely seriously and, the training efforts reflect this fact.

The Easton Police Department also trains yearly in defensive tactics, which focus specifically on the proper utilization of restraint procedures as well as control methods and equipment. Our officers are taught the appropriate way to utilize control methods to gain maximum compliance while minimizing pain or injury to resistors or assailants. Our policies have always included the one being talked about nationally like the chokehold, shooting at a moving vehicle, etc.

The expectation of the Easton Police Department is that every single officer, with no exception, always treat every person with respect and professionalism at all times. We have worked hard to establish this reputation in the community and have done so by holding those officers who fail to follow this lead accountable for their actions. I am happy to report that the City of Easton Police Department is staffed by a group of professional, hard-working men and women with the combined purpose of serving their community with pride and honor and I assure you that we are doing everything we can to make this department and this city an example of greatness.

These advances alone still do not address the systemic barriers that pervade our society.

Our collective failure to address racism and inequality is not just in the area of policing in America. It is in housing and home ownership. And health. And education. And economic opportunity.

True public safety means that everyone, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to build a better life without fear for themselves and their loved ones and has access to the services they need -- Healthcare. Affordable housing. Education. Jobs.

It is reflective of our deep problem that the governmental system has which needs the most reform is our criminal justice system. We need to change that. Reform is needed. Currently it is a system that creates criminals rather than rehabilitates them.

I make a point whenever speaking to other local elected officials --- a city is not going to be able to establish fruitful relationships on the spot in a moment of crisis. It is the relationships we established prior to any incident that were critical in helping us respond to the situation at hand and ability to truly work with the community. For me it is a lifetime of relationships that I treasure every day. I am proud of our relationship with all segments of our community -- both personally and as Mayor.

As a young boy who grew up on the south side in a neighborhood that was racially, ethnically and socio-economically mixed I have difficulty and I have a hard time understanding how some can treat people differently just because of their ethnicity or race.

I pledge to all is that I will continue to promote and encourage fairness and equality among all people and give our youth the type of community I grew up in and ask that as they get older that they too work toward ending, once and for all systemic racism.