July 21, 2021

Dear Austin City Council, City Manager, and Mayor:

We are writing to you today in representation of a coalition of organizations that participated in the Reimagining Public Safety (RPS) Task Force. On April 20, 2021, we presented a list of holistic and detailed recommendations made together with local community members to Austin City Council. These recommendations are concrete proposals for changes the City can make to truly reimagine public safety beyond policing. We have worked together with community members to define and determine what we need to move towards real public safety for all - including access to truly affordable housing, culturally congruent healthcare, and income that provides for basic needs.

After the extensive energy and thousands of hours we and our members poured into designing the recommendations and advocating for them through re-telling traumatic personal experiences, we were hopeful that our recommendations would be prioritized in this year’s budget and beyond. We are now concerned that you and your colleagues on the City Council are bowing to pressure from Governor Abbott, and other white supremacist forces in the state government, and walking back your commitment to reimagining public safety in our community.

We are deeply disappointed that the proposed 2021-2022 fiscal year budget has allocated only $1.9 million for the RPS Task Force recommendations, while assigning a record-high $442.8 million budget for the Austin Police Department (APD). This is an $8.5 Million increase over the level required for compliance with HB1900. Under this new state law, the city would be locked into this increase in policing for years to come. This proposed budget falls far short of maintaining the City’s stated commitment to Reimaging Public Safety, both in its re-commitment to an institution that continues to threaten the life of BIPOC community members, and in its paltry funding of RPS recommended initiatives that would re-invest in the health and economic well-being of over-policed communities.

Although many of the RPS Task Force recommendations are long-term efforts, there are many that are urgently needed in the wake of the pandemic, winter freeze, and continued police violence and surveillance. What our community needs is full funding, in the amounts below, for each RPS Task Force initiative that was recommended for this fiscal year. At a bare minimum, the $8.5 Million increase allocated to APD in the current budget proposal should be re-allocated towards the following priorities for immediate funding for the 2021-2022 fiscal year:

- **$11 million to establish the first-year funding for 10 neighborhood hubs to fund equity-focused community resources in communities made vulnerable by structural disinvestment.** Neighborhood hubs are centers of community life providing services folks need every day regarding transit, shopping, quality food, schools, parks, and social activities – and would bring together all ethnic, income and age groups.
- **$12 million to create a Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot Program,** providing immediate financial support to families in cash. These pilots target particularly vulnerable and
underserved communities and provide a steady and reliable income stream that helps recipients respond to needs as they arise and at their own discretion.

- **$4.5 million for the development of a workforce and training hub of Community Health Workers (CHWs)** that would serve as front-line public health workers who are from and have a close relationship with the communities. Because of this close relationship to the communities, CHWs serve as trusted liaisons between health and social services and community members to facilitate access to services and improve quality of service delivery.

- **$2 million shifted away from harmful surveillance and data sharing conducted by the Austin Regional Intelligence Center (ARIC) and invested instead to support a mandatory Equity Office review prior to consideration of city procurement, grants, and city council agenda items pertaining to Reimagining Public Safety proposals.** This would create a 30-day Equity Office review process for any item it notifies Council that it wishes to review. The review would then be attached to the agenda item when it is posted, and an Equity Office representative would be given space in the public meeting to present its findings.

The threat to our community is too great and the needs too dire to allow the city to appropriate the language of reimagining public safety while continuing to invest in the status quo. While the $30 Million investments from last year’s budget vote would continue in the proposed budget, these are not matched by divestment from cadet classes and police overtime. The city’s attempt to rubber stamp rushed cadet classes as “reimagined” does not stop the harm they will cause or constitute a transition away from patrol policing as recommended by the RPS taskforce. Even the $1.9 Million in reinvestments in RPS Task Force recommendations includes $250,000 further investment in APD through funding of victim services. The funding allocated towards public health workers, neighborhood hubs, and a study of Universal Basic Income is a fraction of what is needed for these initiatives (the RPS task force recommended $27.5 Million this fiscal year for these initiatives) and is not included in a way that respects the vision for these programs as vehicles to community relationship building and autonomy, which are key elements to building alternative safety practices. When we talk about “re-imagining” public safety, it is a transformational process that requires active engagement with our community, especially those whose identities lie at the margins of oppression and who are most directly impacted and affected by exploitation, repression, displacement, and disdain. Without this lens, we are not adequately re-shaping the reality they experience, but only complying on paper.

Throughout our history, every gain that has been made after BIPOC communities rose for their freedom has been accompanied by white supremacist backlash. Indeed, the historical timeline created by the RPS Task Force shows that APD itself arose out of the backlash to the abolition of slavery. Our history is marred by numerous moments when city officials gave into, and even joined, this backlash, allowing hard-fought gains to erode into decades more of injustice. We call on you to recognize that the need for public safety that does not rely on policing is just as dire as it was last year. You still have a responsibility to protect BIPOC community members from the threats they face from policing, and to re-invest in communities that the city has segregated and marginalized. We urge you to learn from history and lead with courage by fully funding these urgently needed community proposals for which you have been provided a blueprint by the Reimagine Public Safety Taskforce.
We ask that you inform us in detail whether you intend to support these proposals, including the dollar amounts for each initiative mentioned. During this crucial time, we expect to hear from you soon and begin conversing together on how to truly move forward to build real safety with our communities.

Sincerely,

Communities of Color United for Racial Justice
Grassroots Leadership
ICE Fuera de Austin/ICE Out of Austin
Texas Harm Reduction Alliance