

SAFE STOP: While the National Debate Rages On, New Jersey is Taking Action to Save Lives by Keeping Routine Traffic Stops Routine

It's all about trust.

When police and the communities they serve trust and respect each other, all of us are safer. It's a simple proposition and one with which few can credibly disagree: If, during a traffic stop, both civilians and police officers trust that neither intends to hurt the other, it's unlikely that the encounter will turn violent.

The truth is that not everyone trusts the police. And the police don't trust everyone they pull over. To understand, one only need consider the senseless execution of Walter Scott by a police officer on April 4, 2015 in Charleston, SC and the ambush of law enforcement officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge - just ten days apart in July, 2016. Regrettably, these events play in the backs of the minds of both police officers and civilians when they encounter one another in traffic stops and elsewhere. The debate that is raging in professional sports about whether athletes must stand during the national anthem reminds of this divide.

Recognizing that this gap in trust isn't going to disappear soon, well-intentioned law enforcement officers are taking action to avoid needless violence. New Jersey is a leader on this front. Annual education on implicit bias, de-escalation techniques and cultural awareness is now required for all New Jersey law enforcement as the result of an initiative launched last year. (The training is provided through our CLEAR Institute - Community Law Enforcement Affirmative Relations.) Community policing initiatives -- like the ones my office sponsored this year -- bring cops together with kids outside of the law enforcement setting. The widespread use of body cameras -- funded in part through forfeiture proceeds and grants, are another tool that will help improve accountability and reduce bad behavior by police and civilians alike. In addition, protocols were recently mandated by my office to eliminate conflicts of interest in investigations of police officers, so as to earn the public's confidence in those investigations.

But these initiatives have one thing in common -- they are all directed by and at law enforcement. None have truly focused on our civilian community members, who, by necessity, are on the other side of every police encounter. This was a missed opportunity. So, for the first time, law enforcement and communities in New Jersey have joined together to launch a campaign focused on the widespread sharing of information with civilians.

In the coming days, you will hear more about our SAFE STOP campaign, in large measure through the words of celebrities, community members, law enforcement and other public figures, all of whom have come together to lend their unified voices to help save lives. We have partnered on this important initiative with the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives and various other law enforcement organizations as well as with leading community organizations including the NAACP, the National Action Network, the Latino Leadership Alliance, Garden State Equality, the ACLU and others. A dedicated website -- SafeStopNJ.com -- as well as videos, public service announcements, and a social media strategy will help spread

the message.

SAFE STOP will share information that can prevent the kind of misunderstanding, miscommunication and other “misses” that have sometimes turned ordinary traffic stops into tension-wracked or violent encounters. This isn’t about politics. It’s not about blame. It’s about sharing critically important information that may not always be obvious or intuitive.

For instance, many don’t know that if an officer asks a driver to get out of the car, the driver is required by law to comply – regardless of whether he or she believes the stop was appropriate, thinks any laws have been broken, or agrees that the command is justified. The same is true of a direction to turn off a car’s engine. It’s the law. Tips like rolling down your windows and placing your hands on the steering wheel are easy ways to reduce tension.

For those who have been treated unfairly by police, we want to know about it. Bad cops breed mistrust and ruin the reputation of good cops. We encourage complaints against police officers who have violated the law or been disrespectful. And if a complaint is not responded to as our newest directive to law enforcement in New Jersey now requires, we have created a dedicated number and web portal to help you follow up directly through the Office of the Attorney General - **833-4-SAFE-NJ** and **safestopnj.com/complaint**.

Let’s be clear: SAFE STOP is a conversation-starter, not a cure-all. And we believe that the public discourse and disagreement about police use of force, trust and community relations should continue as we search for additional and better solutions. But in the meantime, while we work to improve trust and debate whether to stand or kneel, we hope and pray that SAFE STOP serves as a concrete step forward to more routine and fewer deadly police encounters.

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