

Dear Students,

Thank you for your thoughtful letter regarding defunding UConn Police Department. I appreciate your concern for fellow students and members of our community. I am aware of the complaints on social media about experiences with UConn PD, and I take them seriously. We have also been thinking about and discussing with leadership ideas for changing the paradigm of police engagement, as well as ideas for redeploying resources to augment mental health support, some of which are not too dissimilar to several of your suggestions. We are also developing a mechanism to get more input on a regular basis from people of color who have the perspective of the community who most often experience the worst aspects of policing.

I appreciate that impatience and skepticism with police reform is behind the call to completely defund the police. The history of law enforcement in this nation, like the history of race relations, is incredibly fraught. We can cite countless examples over decades of police officers inflicting injustice and even death on citizens – often against people of color or those who were particularly vulnerable. Images like police dogs being set upon on civil rights demonstrators are seared into our collective memory. The death of George Floyd is only the most recent example. There are many others we remember, and likely even more that have been lost to history.

However, there are many reasons that defunding UCPD as you propose is not I believe in the best interest of UConn students and the UConn community. There are many unintended consequences of such an action, and I hope to elucidate some of those here as well as highlight some of the essential public services that UCPD provides that most people are unaware of.

As a practical matter, if there were no UConn Police Department, the Connecticut State Police or municipal departments would become responsible for providing police services to UConn and its campuses. There is no jurisdiction in our state that is not covered by a police agency.

That aside, I need to begin by answering this question: why does UConn need a police department?

The UConn Police Department was not founded to impose order against the backdrop of the tumult of the 1960s. It was created so that UConn could have its own agency to provide police services to our campuses, rather than have to rely on an outside agency, such as the Connecticut State Police.

I don't subscribe to the statement that the UConn Police Department has offered "little help to the UConn community" since its creation. On the contrary, the department has in many ways served our community well.

In a given year, UConn Police respond to about 77,000 calls for service. That is people dialing 911 or otherwise contacting the PD because they have witnessed or been a victim of a crime, are in danger or they need help in one form or another. It is also officers providing community outreach programs, checking buildings to ensure they are safely locked and ensuring our many University events are safe for all to attend. The police respond to all of them. In many cases, the police are providing a service that they are uniquely trained for and qualified to render.

Their service is highly consequential. Some specific examples I want to highlight that illustrate the value of the department:

- When a UConn student was struck and killed by a hit-and-run-driver as she was crossing North Eagleville Road in Storrs one winter night, it was UConn Police officers who investigated the case meticulously for months before identifying and charging the driver who ran over her, who had fled the scene and left the state. He later pleaded no contest.
- When a UConn student was stabbed to death by a non-student on the Storrs campus as he left the Student Union, it was UConn Police officers, with the assistance of other police agencies, who identified, arrested, and charged his killer, who also later pleaded no contest.
- When a student was walking by herself on Horsebarn Hill Road on the Storrs campus and a man in a pickup truck pulled up and ordered her to get in at gunpoint, UConn Police quickly identified the suspect, tracked him down, and arrested him. Found in his truck was a semi-automatic pistol and evidence that he planned a kidnapping and sexual assault. The suspect was convicted of attempted kidnapping with a firearm.

These are only a few of the numerous examples that could be cited. Mercifully, hit-and-run deaths, attempted kidnappings and murder are very rare on our campuses, though not unheard of. But UConn Police officers also serve the community in ways large and small every day in ways that are not widely known or understood. One example: just this past fall, two UConn officers conducting a wellness check on a student found him unconscious in a residence hall. He was in the midst of a medical emergency, was not breathing and had no pulse. It was a well-trained, fast-acting UConn Police officer who immediately performed CPR on the student until he began breathing again and his pulse returned, saving his life. In other cases, officers have responded to parking garages on the Storrs and Farmington campuses and physically stopped people who were suicidal from jumping to their deaths. Our police also aggressively pursue cases of bias and harassment, including those that are racially motivated, and have arrested and charged individuals when these crimes have been committed.

In addition, we also need to be prepared for the possibility that “it” could happen here. What is “it?” It is Virginia Tech. It is Sandy Hook. It is the Pulse nightclub. It is Las Vegas. It is the thing we fear most. I hope beyond anything it never happens here. But does that mean it could never could? I don’t believe so and we should always be prepared. And being prepared means having a police force that can respond quickly to that kind of extreme emergency.

We are not immune from any crime being committed here just because we are a university. A campus or community of our size with no law enforcement presence would leave an immensely vulnerable population.

But how can we reconcile the examples of exemplary service and heroism I note above with the brutal crimes some police officers and agencies have committed against citizens from the earliest days of our nation right up to the death of George Floyd this year?

We cannot reconcile them. This is because all law enforcement cannot be painted with the same broad brush, whether as individuals or as agencies, whether now or across different eras in history.

I cannot speak for any department other than our own, but just as individual officer conduct matters, so does the culture within a department. If a potential police recruit sees themselves as a “warrior” who is there to do battle with the citizens they are supposed to serve, rather than act as a “guardian,” then they do not belong in law enforcement and we do not want them at the University of Connecticut.

If a department’s culture is such that officers see themselves as an occupying army of sorts there to control and suppress their community and its people, then that department is a failure in need of dramatic change. But if a department’s culture is such that officers are well-trained, held to the highest standards and are expected to treat all citizens with respect, courtesy, and professionalism – even if they are arresting someone – then that builds trust and confidence within a community, and serves them well.

It is up to the chief of police and their team to ensure that UConn’s Police Department meets and adheres to those high standards. Does this mean the department is perfect? It does not. I would anticipate that over the years, some UConn Police officers have ignored or abandoned their training, treated people unprofessionally or engaged in misconduct. It is not unlike any other workplace in this respect. But when that happens, disciplining or firing officers who fail to meet our standards is the safeguard that protects the reputation and culture within the department, and helps to build trust with a community. And that is what I expect.

I can vouch for the character and leadership of our police chief and his leadership team, who are thoughtful, progressive officers who demand the best from their department and its personnel.

I can tell you that our officers were as horrified and disgusted as the rest of us when they saw the video of the death of George Floyd. Our department stands strongly against such brutality and has said so.

In addition, the UConn Police Department serves a unique and specialized population, so their training is unique and specialized. The police department has fully embraced their role as first responders to students in crisis. Approximately 76 percent (62 officers) have Crisis Intervention Training, one of the highest percentages in the state. This is an in-depth training assisting officers in responding to people in crisis. In addition to training, the department has sponsored and developed programs to increase community engagement and trust. One of these is the facility dog program. As one of the first university police departments in the country to have a facility dog, both the department and community have found the

presence of Tildy an invaluable trust builder on our campuses. The program has been so successful that the department will add another facility dog to the Farmington campus. Our program served as a model program for other police departments, in fact Yale University Police Department worked with our officers to start their own program.

With respect to mental health: for students with mental health needs, including those who are in crisis, it is always preferable for their main point of contact and resource to be a mental health professional, rather than a police officer. Given the dramatic increase in mental health needs among the college-aged population nationally, including here at UConn, I created a task force on mental health services at UConn this past fall. They were charged with reviewing our current efforts, understanding areas of diminished capacity, and identifying priorities for best practice and expansion of care for our students. This include issues of funding and personnel.

I don't see funding the police and funding mental health services on campus to be an either-or choice. They are both important. The police department is a critical partner in responding to mental health concerns on our campuses. A defunding of them would weaken, not strengthen, UConn's mental health response network. We need to prioritize mental health funding at UConn irrespective of what the police budget is. The task force will issue their report in the fall.

In addition, UConn's police chief is in the process of transitioning several vacant sworn officer positions into civilian community service-based positions in an ongoing effort to best meet the needs of the community. These positions would be used to augment the police response to non-threatening incidents.

With respect to one of the numbers you cited in your letter: I want to clarify that it is not accurate that 88% of UConn PD cases are drug/or alcohol related. Clery statistics include incidents reported by law enforcement as well by Campus Security Authorities (non-police department employees). Most of the alcohol and drug referrals were not initiated by a police officer, rather they were referred by a CSA. In fact, only 30% out of all drug and alcohol related statistics were a result of police interaction. Seventy percent had very little to do with the police department.

Please note that all police reports are public information eventually. If there is a particular case you are interested in or that has been brought to your attention, you can contact the police department to ask for a copy of the documents associated with the case so you can read the materials yourself. You would just need to be able to supply a name associated with the case.

With respect to the sexual assault numbers you cited: a longer and more involved discussion is needed in order to understand them. That is a discussion I am happy to facilitate if you would like. It involves not only the PD, but other university offices and staff members, such as the Office of Institutional Equity and our Title IX Coordinator. Also, regarding sexual assault response: sexual assault is a crime and while we must always provide a multitude of services and resources to victims, the role of the police is to investigate it as a criminal matter. To that end, the UConn Police Department has actually created a Special Victims Unit focused specifically on investigating these crimes and supporting victims.

While you may disagree with me, I wanted to respond to your letter to share my own perspective, nonetheless.

In closing, I wanted to note that my goal as president is to ensure that UConn's Police Department is a national leader in progressive thinking when it comes to law enforcement and a department with enlightened leaders who are always willing to evolve to best meet the needs of our community. Over the past three years, UConn PD has shown a commitment to best practices in de-escalation training, sensitivity and bias training and use of force policy. But we all recognize that this is not enough. Best practices need to get better – for our community and for the nation. I believe UConn can and should play a lead role in making that happen, and I look forward to working with broad constituencies to that end.

Sincerely,

Tom

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Katsouleas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Thomas Katsouleas  
President