

Snail's Pace: Black Lives Matter activists say progress is achingly slow

It's half past six on a cool May night and everyone in the small crowd gathered in front of the State House has bowed their head in silence. They're marking one year since the murder of George Floyd and taking stock of what has happened since.

More than 365 days later, Derek Chauvin — who knelt on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and killed him, on video no less — was convicted of two counts of murder and one count of manslaughter. The activists in front of the State House, however, including progressive legislators like Representative **David Morales** and Senator **Tiara Mack**, aren't satisfied with the little progress on the issues they've spent years advocating for in Rhode Island. As the Warren Zevon song goes, "That shit that used to work, it won't work now."

"Justice is Black people not dying at the hands of police," said **Harrison Tuttle**, executive director of the Black Lives Matter RI PAC, which organized the event at the State House. The PAC was created during last summer's explosive protests and is staffed by young, POC activists from the metro area. Its mission is to tirelessly support and elect young, POC and progressive candidates for local office. Tuttle continued, "Justice looks like ending state-sanctioned violence, ending systemic problems that cause inequalities in housing and education and most importantly, policing. And we must look to reinvest in those areas that need it the most, instead of pouring more funds into policing and less funds into necessary services."

"Due to the [police] academy's inability to produce law enforcement that can protect and serve all people despite color, race and ethnicity," said Joyce Wise, a former BLM RI executive director, "we can no longer trust the academy to produce law enforcement officers that will protect and serve all of us." Activists are calling for the repeal of the Law Enforcement Bill of Rights (LEOBoR). LEOBoR has been controversial with community organizers for years in Rhode Island, and efforts to repeal or reform the additional rights it grants law enforcement has become a perennial effort in the state legislature.

LEOBoR provides an extra layer of legal protections and rights to the state's law enforcement officers. If, for example, a police chief wants to discipline an officer for more than two days, it automatically prompts a three-member panel. The officer being disciplined has the right to choose one active duty or retired officer to serve on the three-member panel. Nothing sounds more Rhode Island than an alignment of interest, right?

A relic of the 20th century, LEOBoR was passed into law in 1976; Rhode Island is one of 15 states that still have laws like this on the books. It's become a major roadblock to police accountability in the state, with the peer panels having virtually no incentive to uphold any disciplinary action. Police chiefs and other leaders also are prohibited from speaking about any disciplinary action officers may or may not receive. As followers of any juicy local political scandal are aware, this is something not granted to any other public servants in the state.

Legislation has been introduced for a full repeal of LEOBoR. The Rhode Island Association of Police Chiefs, while open to reforming it, are not considering a full repeal. Newly minted Governor **Dan McKee**, in an April press conference, opined that police officers need to be held accountable, saying, "I

do believe it needs reform to make sure that there is accountability.” Lieutenant Governor **Sabina Matos** agreed with calls for reforming the law, a marked difference from her earlier calls for a full repeal.

But it’s more than just a single set of bad laws, activists say. Racism is the inherent vice in the Rhode Island system. “This past year and more has been marked by more Black deaths at the hand of state violence, systemic violence, of Black, brown and low-income communities,” said Senator Mack.

It’s a common, frustrated refrain from activists, that violence comes from more than just law enforcement. Rhode Island has only just now passed a pathway to a \$15 minimum wage (to be phased in gradually over five years), meaning the people in greatest need of a wage hike will have to wait even longer. The pandemic disproportionately impacted the state’s working poor and, contrary to what local, vocal boosters say, the rising tide of recovery has not lifted all boats.

While affordable housing bonds were passed earlier this year, the state government has no dedicated funding stream for building affordable housing. Rent and house prices have skyrocketed during the pandemic, and many struggling working families were housing-cost-burdened before. Cannabis legalization is on the way, but expungement for cannabis-related criminal offenses during its prohibition is not.

“Indifference is not gonna pave a path to justice,” said Dr. **Luis Daniel Munoz** to the crowd on that May evening. “The fact is, indifference is pretty pervasive in all of the institutions, whether it’s policing or the building right behind us.”

Munoz is a gubernatorial candidate for the 2022 election, and progressives, fresh off a number of victories in the last election, are looking ahead. Electioneering, once the realm of pencilneck policy wonks and the kind of nerds who *really* like applying statistics to sports, is a keystone of BLM RI PAC and antiracist organizers. Tuttle points out that eight seats on Providence City Council are up for election next year.

Not much happened in the last year, but who knows what’s possible in the next?