

With the opportunity to hire a new Director of Public Safety and a new Police Chief, St. Louis has important choices to make. The Coalition Against Police Crimes urges Mayor Krewson to open the doors and windows of St. Louis government and welcome in some fresh air.

Around the country we are hearing calls for transformative change in our perception of what we mean by public safety. Past “solutions” have tried to keep us safe by arresting and incarcerating. Our jails and prisons are overflowing, and still we do not feel safe. A system that does not solve the root problems of racism, poverty, housing and healthcare will always produce more “criminals”. And how safe can a child born in Jeff-Vander-Lou feel when her life expectancy is 18 years less than a child born in Clayton?

After generations of choosing a Police Chief from inside the department, we need the fresh perspective of an outsider. We also need a Director of Public Safety and a Police Chief, working together, who understand that solving community safety problems requires police to partner with other government agencies, private social service providers, and most importantly with members of the affected community.

Successfully recruiting and selecting candidates with this vision must involve the community in all stages of the selection process. There are models for this type of Police Chief search around the country. Portland created committees of diverse residents to capture community values, write a job description and vet candidates. Cincinnati and Pittsburgh had the same diverse community group work in conjunction with a professional search team to broaden the scope and quality of its outreach to candidates.

Though her more recent statements allowed for the possibility of community members on the search team, Mayor Krewson originally downplayed community involvement in the selection process even before that process has been explored or created. Citing a concern for the privacy of applicants, she has rejected citizen participation in candidate interviews, a process that Ferguson recently implemented without problems. The mayor’s initial statement exemplifies the “old school” status quo fallback position which she must overcome to represent the whole city of St. Louis. We hope her position continues to evolve.

Her concerns can be met by the creation of a confidentiality agreement signed by those involved. More importantly, we need candidates who are willing to take some risks to be part of an open community process. St. Louis can ill afford a Chief who merely pays lip service to transformative community policing.

We look forward to helping shape a selection process that allows the people of the city to know that the new Public Safety leadership is our leadership, representing our values in such a way that we are serving and protecting each other.