

## Grieder: Push for police reform shouldn't be scuttled in favor of partisan politics

By: Erica Grieder - Sep. 12, 2020

Pastor John D. Ogletree reflected Thursday evening that it had been a sad day in Houston, and a somber one.

Four city police officers were fired that day for their roles in the April 21 death of Nicolas Chavez, in an incident captured on police video that was finally made public after months of calls, from activists, to “release the tapes.”



The video, presented by Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner at a press conference along with Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo, was “difficult to watch,” Turner noted. Chavez was in the midst of a psychiatric crisis when police were summoned to the scene, and the officers spent some time trying unsuccessfully to defuse the situation, which escalated tragically when Chavez grabbed a Taser one of them had dropped.

The officers “had a lot of other opportunities and a lot of other options readily available to them,” Acevedo said, explaining that the officers could have taken a few steps back rather than opening fire as they did, resulting in Chavez’ death.

“He could have lived and could have gotten the help that he desperately needed,” concurred Turner.

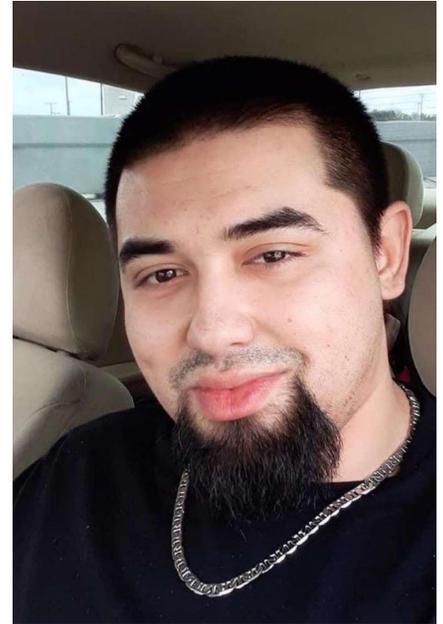
But as Ogletree noted Thursday evening, at the beginning of an online summit on justice coordinated by [The Metropolitan Organization](#) of Houston and the [Network of Texas IAF Organizations](#), Chavez’ death wasn’t an isolated incident.

“Chavez was the first of six killed by HPD officers during a two-month stretch, April and May,” Ogletree said. “All of these were men of color who were killed.”

He put these deaths in the broader context. Over the past six months, the nation has been roiled by a series of high-profile incidents of police violence involving persons of color: the shooting death of 26-year-old Kentucky emergency medical technician Breonna Taylor in March, after police entered her Louisville home on a no-knock warrant; the protracted death of 46-year-old George Floyd in Minneapolis in May, as a police officer knelt on his neck for nearly 9 minutes; the firing of seven shots into the back of 29-year-old Jacob Blake, in Kenosha, Wis. during an arrest last month, leaving the father of six paralyzed.

“The cry now across the nation is for justice,” Ogletree continued. “Since May, there has been a heightened sense of rage, desperation, and resolve to shift the way policing is done in America.”

That’s certainly true, and it’s the best reason to feel optimistic about the prospects for police reform in Houston, at least. Turner in June established a task force on the topic, which continues to do its work. In the interim, City Council members Martha Castex-Tatum, Jerry Davis, Carolyn Evans-Shabazz, Edward Pollard and Tiffany Thomas last month sent a letter to Turner calling for action on 25 proposals, including a “complete overhaul” of Houston’s Independent Police Oversight Board. Turner on Thursday said he is nearly certain there will be some changes to the board, at least.



At the state level, however, progress seems unlikely in the near term. State leaders have conflated calls for police reform with demands to “defund the police.” Gov. Greg Abbott this week called on all candidates running for office this year to sign a “Texas Backs the Blue” pledge, opposing efforts to defund the police. And on Thursday, he proposed new legislation that would crack down on any cities that might have different ideas: his idea is that cities that defund the police would lose their annexation powers in perpetuity.

“It is particularly offensive that some cities are disrespecting and even defunding our law enforcement agencies in communities across the state,” Abbott said at a press conference Thursday, flanked by Texas House Speaker Dennis Bonnen and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. All are Republicans.

Earlier this summer, Abbott proposed a permanent property tax freeze for cities that defund the police. And both of these ideas might be described, generously, as a solution in search of a problem. While “defund the police” has become an increasingly popular hashtag in certain internet circles, very few Texans have embraced the idea. Even the left-leaning Austin City Council — Abbott’s bogeyman, in this and other contexts — didn’t outright defund the city’s police department. Rather it cut its budget by roughly one-third, shifting most of those funds to other city departments. Victims’ services and forensic sciences would move to other departments, and \$50 million would be used to create a “Reimagine Safety Fund.”

Such details may or may not matter to Abbott. Polls suggest that his crusade against efforts to defund the police will probably be a popular one, even if the threat the governor is positing is an abstract one. Austin Mayor Steve Adler, in a statement, indicated that he sees the governor's motives in this context as essentially political.

“Not surprising the President's rhetoric is finding its way to Texas as we get closer to November,” said Adler, noting that Austin is one of the safest major cities in the country.

It's not surprising, but it does represent a missed opportunity. Republican leaders such as Abbott should consider that the calls for police reform, coming from both sides of the aisle, are just that, rather than some kind of euphemism for a wholesale dismantling of law enforcement. And most of the reformers see police as a potential partner in this effort, rather than the enemy. That was one of the points many speakers made at the TMO and Texas IAF summit Thursday evening



“We are simply asking police to do too much,” said Nick Hudson, a criminal justice policy analyst at the ACLU of Texas. “We ask them to deal with people who are experiencing homelessness and mental illness, and addiction and overdose; to resolve conflicts between family members; to take accident reports; to deal with people who are suicidal.”

“Look, these are real social problems,” he continued, “But the question is, are the police the best people to respond to them? I think that any fair-minded person would say no. The question is, how do we better define the role that we want police officers to play in our community?”

That's an important conversation that our leaders should be willing to have with Texans on both sides of the aisle, rather than simply wielding election-year threats and pledges about backing the blue.

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