

CITIZENS FOR JD WOOTEN
PO Box 5191
Greensboro, NC 27435
336-701-9310
info@jdwooten.com
jdwooten.com



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Dear Friends,

More than a month has passed since I shared my last letter with our community, and we are still in the midst of a deadly pandemic, a deep recession, and a reckoning with racism. I believe that we will be for some time, so I want to take a moment to share my perspective on a pressing issue that relates directly to our challenges of correcting racial injustice: police use of force. I have had the opportunity to share many of these thoughts in public forums over the last several months, but I want to be sure that I have shared these thoughts with the entire community as well.

Many of the most important changes we need must come at the local level. Other important issues, such as the legal issues involving qualified immunity, must be addressed at the federal level. Regardless, there is a role for the General Assembly in these changes, and I hope that we can be part of the solution with a Democratic majority in 2021!

So what can the state do to take a lead on police reform? Here are seven proposals that Senators Jackson, Nickel, and Murdock developed based on reforms that have worked in other states. The first five have passed in “red” states, so I believe that bipartisan support for these proposals is possible. I support all of these measures and hope that we can work to implement them soon.

1. **Empower Citizen Oversight Boards:** Although local governments can have these boards now, state law bars these boards from having the authority to compel witnesses to attend and respond to questions. We do not need to force local governments to have these boards, but we should allow them greater flexibility to actually have an impact when they do.
2. **Body Camera Accessibility for Local Government:** At a minimum, we should allow city and town councils and mayors the ability to review footage after an incident in a timely fashion. They can then make a decision about releasing that footage to the public. This would empower local officials to quickly assess incidents, inform the public, and thereby increase overall accountability and transparency.
3. **Ban Chokeholds:** Although we leave many such tactical decisions to local communities, this one is so plainly dangerous and unnecessary that it deserves a state-wide ban.
4. **Limit Participation in the 1033 Program:** We should limit access to certain military-grade surplus equipment for policing. Our police and military serve phenomenally different roles and need to remain distinct in our society. Militarizing our police forces blurs what should be a clear line between our police and military, encouraging a harmful culture we should actively work to discourage.
5. **Fully Participate in the FBI’s Incident Data System:** The FBI has a database to track a variety of actions taken by local law enforcement, but participation is voluntary. We should make it mandatory to increase accountability, transparency, and show us where we are doing things right so that others may learn from those lessons.



6. **Duty to Intervene:** Those who are often the most capable of stopping unlawful use of force by a police officer are fellow officers. We should make it an expectation that officers intervene when fellow officers use unlawful force. This must be accompanied with an increase in training about the expectation of intervention.
7. **Funding for Mental Health Response Teams:** Our police often serve functions beyond those of traditional police officers, such as those of social workers and mental healthcare workers, and frequently without the training and resources necessary to do those jobs well. Incorporating those professionals—such as mental healthcare workers, social workers, and crisis counselors—into our first responder force would allow our police officers to focus on traditional policing.

None of this means that I believe our police should be defunded. First, police funding is a local issue and to the maximum extent possible, I do not want to see the General Assembly dictating terms of local budgets to cities and towns across the state. That simply will not work. Second, I believe many of the above proposals, coupled with additional reforms at the local level,¹ will achieve the desired effect of improving the accountability, functionality, and responsiveness of our police forces.

We ask our men and women in uniform—military and law enforcement alike—to do very difficult jobs. Our police officers wear the uniform to protect and serve our communities. We owe it to them to make sure they have the resources necessary to succeed in the mission we ask of them. At the same time, we must carefully reflect on the proper scope of that mission. As outlined above, some of what we ask of our police officers is beyond traditional policing. Many of these tasks could be done better by others. Shifting those responsibilities, along with other proposals like eliminating access to military-grade weapons, will naturally reduce budgets. Some of these proposals will increase spending, like more expansive use of body cameras or improving training in de-escalation techniques and unconscious biases. Ultimately, a properly defined mission for our police should drive the appropriate budgets with adequate resources to serve and protect our communities.

And as I closed my last letter, we have many challenges ahead. The road will be long and difficult. As we work through these challenges together, please do not overlook the little things we can do for one another daily. Look out for your friends and neighbors, be kind and respectful to others, and try to say or do something nice to or for someone else whenever possible. We all need it right now.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "JD Wooten", written in a cursive style.

JD Wooten
Candidate, NC Senate
District 24

¹ I strongly encourage and would actively work to support cities and towns that implement recommendations like those found at Scantwait.org. These eight recommended changes have been shown to reduce violence when implemented, and many of our cities already implement several of these policies. Two of these policies are on the state-wide recommendations above—banning chokeholds and the duty to intervene.