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After George Floyd's death, MN police training programs aim to do better on race

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The latest high-profile death of a Black man in police custody has law enforcement training programs across Minnesota searching for ways they can do better.

Since soon after George Floyd's May 25 death, a work group from the Minnesota State college and university system has been meeting weekly to consider changes for its 22 schools that churn out 80 percent of the state's licensed peace officers.

Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer who knelt on Floyd's neck and who is charged with Floyd's murder, attended three of those schools.

"We know we're a big piece of this," said Ron Anderson, Minnesota State's senior vice chancellor of academic and student affairs.

Michael Birchard, associate vice president for equity and inclusion at Inver Hills Community and Dakota County Technical colleges, said he felt disappointed in himself following Floyd's death, so he wrote a call to action to the dean who oversees the law enforcement programs.

A group quickly formed with a goal of transforming their training, he said.

Tia Robinson Cooper, provost and vice president of academic affairs at Inver Hills, said they want students to understand racial equity issues, including implicit bias, and develop a public service mind-set before they enter law enforcement careers.

To instill that mind-set, first-year law enforcement students will be required to take a course where they engage in service learning.

Anderson said the system's training programs have examined themselves following previous police killings of people of color. What's different this time, he said, is they're inviting input from the broader community.

Minnesota State University, Mankato, for example, held its fourth public forum Wednesday on reforming its training program. The school expects to recommend changes to its program by Oct. 1.

The higher education system also is being pushed by its chancellor, Devinder Malhotra, who has made diversity, equity and inclusion a priority.

"We have a responsibility to ensure that these programs also directly address issues of racism and social justice, producing graduates who are culturally competent (and) are able to equitably respond to all of those whom they are charged to serve and protect, regardless of skin color, national origin or identity," Malhotra told the Minnesota State Board of Trustees on Wednesday.

This fall, faculty from all 22 schools will come together for a deep dive into their curriculum and teaching practices, viewed through an equity lens.

That group, too, is being asked to suggest changes to the Board of Peace Officer Standards and Training, which administers the officer licensing exam and generally determines what training programs must teach.

Minnesota State also has a goal of recruiting and retaining more faculty of color for the programs.

"If we're going to teach a culturally responsive program, we need to also have faculty who can do the same," said Sherrise Truesdale-Moore, an associate professor of corrections at Mankato.

Truesdale-Moore said she studied at two historically black colleges and universities and much of what she learned is missing from Mankato's program.

Minnesota State trustee Jerry Janezich raised the concern that officers discard what they've learned in school once they are hired.

"Once students leave us and go into individual departments, things tend to break down," he said.

Anderson said the schools can try to address that on the front end by emphasizing to prospective students that law enforcement is a public service career and later through conversations about leadership, entering the workforce and interacting with communities.

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Josh has written about St. Paul public schools and higher education for the Pioneer Press since 2014, 11 years after the paper first published his byline as a University of Minnesota intern. He did a two-year stint on city government and crime in Austin, Minn., and spent seven years in Sioux Falls, S.D. covering crime and education, as well as editing. Josh was good at baseball once. Now he plays tennis against old men.

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