

Fall 2019

**Boston City Council Candidates  
Public Safety Questionnaire**

**Candidate: Alkia Powell**

## 1. Immigration and Policing

Thousands of people are arrested each year in the City of Boston for minor offenses like driving without a license, drug possession, and disorderly conduct. Data obtained by the ACLU shows these minor arrests disproportionately impact Black and Latinx Bostonians. Each time the Boston Police arrest someone, there is the potential for ICE to be notified — putting our immigrant neighbors at substantially greater risk for detention and deportation. Charges for these minor arrests are often dropped, but there is collateral, and often irreparable, damage.

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to limit the number of arrests for minor offenses in Boston? Please list your policy goals related to this issue.

***POWELL:** I have worked and created programs with the Boston Police Department (BPD), Suffolk County Sheriff Department and the District Attorney's Department in the past by supporting their Community Services office and running neighbourhood safety events that helped create more awareness for that. We brought police officers and the community together to make our youth aware that the police are not your enemy, but are here to help you, lift you up and be your friend. I have co-written and produced a curriculum with all three agencies on "Overcoming Violence" during my time in the Office of Community Relations at UMass Boston. This video and curriculum I facilitated with UMass Boston graduate students and UMass Boston's Video Production Center worked with the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office on this video for the DA office's Overcoming Violence curriculum, an update of the Understanding Violence curriculum presented in city schools and youth centers for the past 10 years. (attach a copy of the curriculum)*

*News Clip: [Overcoming Violence billboard launch](#)*

*Video Link: [Overcoming Violence Video](#)*

*With that being said, these kinds of arrests, which disproportionately affect Black and Latinx Bostonians contributes to the stereotype that the police are not looking out for everyone's best interests. I will work together with the community and the BPD to ensure that minor charges are handled more effectively and minor offences do not constitute major consequences.*

- I aim for the Community and the Police Department to be on a better standing with one another through continued education and programing*
- For there to be less of a fear and a stigma surrounding the police force by continuing to recruit more law enforcement officials of color*
- And to reestablish that the Boston Police Department is there to create safer neighbourhoods and reassure the public*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you encourage the police commissioner to exercise greater discretion and stop making arrests for minor offenses?

***POWELL:** Yes*

The Boston Police Department's (BPD) existing policies allow officers and intelligence analysts to collect and share information about people who are not suspected of criminal activity with the federal government. For example, the Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC) is a unit of the Boston Police Department that gathers, analyzes, and shares intelligence — like the gang database — with federal law enforcement. However, the database disproportionately documents men of color, using broad identification criteria. The BRIC possesses an unknown amount of information about Boston residents, is not subject to public oversight, and has the power to put people at risk of surveillance, police stops, and deportation.<sup>1</sup> Data from the BRIC was recently used to deport at least one Boston Public School student, when a BPD incident report — which contained unsubstantiated allegations that the student was a gang member — was shared with ICE.<sup>2</sup> The BPD's information collection and sharing policy puts immigrants, people of color, protesters, and journalists at risk when that information is shared with federal agencies under the Trump administration.

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to create transparency and oversight of the BRIC? What will you do to address the Boston Police Department's policy of sharing information about people not suspected of criminal activity with the federal government?

***POWELL:** It is important that BRIC is held accountable and made more transparent, however we do have to understand that some information must be kept private so that the Boston Police Department is able to function and actually carry out their jobs, i.e. in the case of gang crimes. The policy of sharing information about people not suspected of criminal activity must be stopped or explained on a case by case basis because simple information can be hugely detrimental to people if the federal government gets hold of it. We do not want our communities to live in fear, so this is a policy which must be stopped or at least made far more transparent as to what basis information on people is being gathered on if not suspected of criminal activity.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you support ending the gang database?

***POWELL:** No*

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<sup>1</sup> Dooling, S. (2019, July 26). Here's What We Know About Boston Police's Gang Database. Retrieved from <https://www.wbur.org/news/2019/07/26/boston-police-gang-database-immigration>.

<sup>2</sup> Dooling, S. (2018, December 13). What A Boston Student's Deportation Reveals About School Police And Gang Intelligence. Retrieved from <https://www.wbur.org/news/2018/12/13/east-boston-student-discipline-to-deportation>.

## 2. Surveillance of Muslims

Boston was named a pilot city for a federal "countering violent extremism" (CVE) campaign in 2014. Since then, a number of Boston institutions, including the Boston Police Department, have been involved with programs funded by CVE grants. One such program, the Youth and Police Initiative Plus, focuses on Somali youth who are deemed a potential threat due to the social and economic trauma that they experience as immigrants and refugees. CVE programs across the country have NOT made communities safer, but instead have deterred political participation and access to social services for Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to ensure funding is available to support social services for immigrant communities, and that this funding is not tied to law enforcement?

**POWELL:** *By getting involved in the budget and the overall distribution of funds throughout our city. By working on the budget, I would know that funds were being used to support social services for immigrant communities and help our communities grow and be safer. No one race, culture of any kind should be targeted because of their religion and or cultural being.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you support ending BPD's involvement in any community outreach programs that credit false and stigmatizing theories about predispositions toward violence or "extremism," including Youth and Police Initiative Plus?

**POWELL:** *Yes*

Law enforcement should not investigate people unless officers have reasonable, articulable suspicion of involvement in criminal activity. The FBI does not require a criminal predicate for Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) investigations, which often have no connection to anything ordinary people would recognize as terrorist activity; in fact, current federal policy allows the FBI to investigate anyone based on no suspicion of criminality whatsoever. The problematic relationship between local law enforcement and the Joint Terrorism Task Force has been recognized by San Francisco, CA and Portland, OR. As a result, both cities have formally cut ties with the Joint Terrorism Task Force.<sup>4/5</sup> BPD collaboration with the FBI, which has historically targeted Muslims for improper surveillance and entrapment operations, puts Muslim Bostonians at risk of federal harassment.

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to protect Muslim Bostonians and activists from unwarranted federal harassment and surveillance?

**POWELL:** *I will advocate for Boston to follow the lead of cities like San Francisco and Portland in cutting ties with the Joint Terrorism Task Force. The lazy and stigmatizing*

<sup>3</sup> Fact Sheet: Countering Violent Extremism: Myths and Facts: Brennan Center for Justice. (2015, November 02). Retrieved from <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/countering-violent-extremism-myths-and-facts>.

<sup>4</sup> Nakashima, E. (2017, March 10). San Francisco Police Department pulls out of FBI anti-terrorism task force. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/san-francisco-police-department-pulls-out-of-fbi-anti-terrorism-task-force/2017/03/10/62e05bcc-fd09-11e6-8f41-ea6ed597e4ca\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/san-francisco-police-department-pulls-out-of-fbi-anti-terrorism-task-force/2017/03/10/62e05bcc-fd09-11e6-8f41-ea6ed597e4ca_story.html).

<sup>5</sup> FAQ on withdrawing from the Joint Terrorism Task Force. (2019, February 12). Retrieved from <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/hardesty/article/712320>.

*method which the Task Force prescribes to only leads to greater racial profiling, which is a dangerous prospect. It does not constitute a harmonious and strong community if we condemn the Muslim Bostonians to live in fear of federal harassment.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you support efforts to end BPD collaboration with the Joint Terrorism Task Force, as the City of San Francisco has done?

***POWELL:*** Yes

### 3. Racial Profiling

According to data from the Boston Police Department, as analyzed and reported by The Boston Globe, 70 percent of the nearly 15,000 individuals that police observed, interrogated, or searched in 2016 were Black. Meanwhile, Black people make up 25 percent of the population in Boston.<sup>6</sup> Black and Brown people are also punished more harshly than white people for drug offenses. Although people of color in Boston make up less than 28 percent of people convicted of drug possession, they are roughly 55 percent of those convicted of drug distribution and 75 percent of those convicted of mandatory minimum drug offenses.<sup>7</sup> Similar disparities encouraged the City of Providence to require data collection of any police stops or searches through the Community-Police Relations Safety Act.<sup>8</sup>

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to eliminate racial bias in policing, besides previously proposed plans of hiring more officers of color?

***POWELL:** Training schemes must be implemented for the police to not racially profile, and greater emphasis must be placed on the recruitment and hiring process in the Boston Police Department to ensure that there is diversity, but not just hiring more officers of colour, psychological testing to determine tolerant minds in the Police Force is something I would advocate for, as racial profiling is often very deep-rooted and undiscoverable in the current hiring process.*

*In addition, organizations such as Latino Law Enforcement Group of Boston (LLEGO Boston) who has already endorsed me, has proven through their mission of promoting community policing and engagement and encouraging young people to consider law enforcement as a career is possible! More programming as such should be implemented. I am proud to be apart of this amazing group of latino officers in law enforcement!*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you work to make the Boston Police Department conduct an audit of their arrest data, to include racial disparities in arrest rates for drug offenses?

***POWELL:** Yes*

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<sup>6</sup> Ransom, J. (2017, August 29). Blacks remain focus of Boston police investigations, searches. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/08/28/blacks-remain-focus-boston-police-investigations-searches/PDbFr2QZexCEi3zJTO9mOJ/story.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Surveys of Massachusetts sentencing practices. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.mass.gov/lists/surveys-of-massachusetts-sentencing-practices>.

<sup>8</sup> Providence Community-Police Relations Act. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://providenceri.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail\\_LegiFile.aspx?MeetingID=6206&ID=3786](https://providenceri.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail_LegiFile.aspx?MeetingID=6206&ID=3786).

## 4. Drug Arrests

According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the opioid overdose death rate is 120 times higher for those recently released from incarceration compared to the rest of the adult population.<sup>9</sup> While the overdose and drug contamination crises have moved some politicians to discuss the importance of harm reduction services and a public health response, our local and statewide laws and budgets still prioritize punishment rather than a public health response to drug use. For over 50 years, the criminalization of drugs and of people who use and sell drugs has failed to curtail drug use and substance use disorder; the policy has also led to the arrest, punishment, and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of people — a majority of whom are people of color — and limited resources for education, treatment, economic empowerment, housing, and other social services outside the criminal legal system.

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what are your policy proposals to increase access to long-term treatment, limit arrests for drugs, and implement evidence-based harm reduction services, such as safe consumption spaces?

***POWELL:** I think it is important to first and foremost stop treating drug users as criminals and start treating them as those who need our help. They need our help to get the resources, the support and guidance necessary to cut addiction. I would seek to increase funding for social and medical help, but at the same time I would limit arrests for drugs because as long as someone feels criminalised, they become marginalised within society and may not look to the state for support.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you support curtailing law enforcement responses to drug use, ending arrests for personal possession and small sales of all drugs, and instead implementing a public health referral response based on human rights?

***POWELL:** Yes*

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<sup>9</sup> Chapter 55 Data Visualization. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://chapter55.digital.mass.gov/>.

## 5. Electronic and Digital Privacy

In June, the City of Somerville became the first East Coast city to ban municipal use of facial recognition technology. This technology is replete with racial and gender bias. Private companies are aggressively pushing its use on police departments across Massachusetts, endangering people's civil rights and civil liberties. There are currently no statutory protections in place to guard against abuse or misuse of this flawed and biased surveillance technology.

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to ensure Bostonians' privacy rights aren't being invaded by face surveillance technology?

**POWELL:** *I will advocate for face surveillance technology to be outlawed. The serious consequences for people who will be unfairly treated due to racial and gender bias renders this technology discriminatory and completely out of line with the anti-discrimination rights fought for in the Civil Rights Act.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you vote in favor of an ordinance to ban the municipal government from using face surveillance technology, as Somerville, San Francisco, and Oakland have done?

**POWELL:** *Yes*

Cities and counties across the country, including Cambridge and Lawrence, Massachusetts, have enacted policies to require transparency and City Council approval of surveillance technology acquisitions by city agencies.

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to ensure transparency and democratic accountability around new surveillance technology acquisitions?

**POWELL:** *Ensure that these surveillance systems are not simply implemented without the knowledge and approval of the citizens and communities. These surveillance systems should be used for the safety of the people, so there should be no issue with making the technology more transparent for the community and letting the people decide whether they would like the surveillance or not.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you vote in favor of an ordinance to require City Council approval before city agencies use or acquire surveillance technologies?

**POWELL:** *Yes*

## 6. Plainclothes Policing

Several tactical units of the Boston Police Department patrol in plainclothes. They often drive unmarked vehicles while wearing street clothes. We lack crucial public information about the Youth Violence Strike Force, the Drug Control Unit, or the Anti-Crime units. This missing information includes: number of officers, budget, equipment used, complaints received, stops made, and arrest data. In New York City, plainclothes police officers are involved disproportionately in fatal shootings.<sup>10</sup>

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what will you do to ensure transparency and assess the impact of tactical units on community wellbeing?

***POWELL:** Data on these units must be made more transparent, we have to know where our public funds are going and why. There is a level of discretion which the Police Department must be afforded but many of these units and task forces need to be made more transparent in order for the Community and the Police Department to come together more peacefully and for the people to begin trusting our police forces more.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you support the abolition of plainclothes policing?

***POWELL:** No*

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<sup>10</sup> The Intercept. (2018, May 09). Plainclothes NYPD Cops Are Involved in a Staggering Number of Killings. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/09/saheed-vassell-nypd-plain-clothes/>.

## 7. Overtime Spending

Within a budget of more than \$414 million for FY2020, the Boston Police Department budget allocated over \$58 million for overtime.<sup>11</sup> Police overtime spending exceeds spending on youth jobs and community centers.<sup>12</sup> Current overtime policies allow for excessive spending, including a mandate that officers testifying in court are paid for a minimum of four hours even if they're in court for less than an hour. Boston Police officers also collect pay for thousands of hours for construction details, while civilians flaggers work those sites in other cities and states.

If elected or reelected to the City Council what will you do to curb excessive overtime spending and invest in community social services?

***POWELL:** This is a difficult question because it somewhat undermines the importance our police officers give towards our communities, and the overtime that they provide could be invaluable. I will make sure that community social services receives the funding they require without necessarily handicapping the Police Department's spending.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you work to impose stricter limitations on police overtime spending and invest cost savings in housing, education, youth jobs, and drug treatment?

***POWELL:** No*

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<sup>11</sup> City of Boston. (2019, June 13). Budget. Retrieved from <https://www.boston.gov/departments/budget>.

<sup>12</sup> "Budget | Boston.gov." <https://www.boston.gov/departments/budget>. Accessed 2 Jul. 2019.

## 8. Transparency and Public Accountability

The Boston Police Department has made some progress in terms of opening its data to the public. But currently, arrest data and stop-and-frisk data are not available to the public on an ongoing basis via the city's data portal. These data can be posted online without compromising the privacy of Boston residents. Stop-and-frisk and arrest data are critical to understanding the impact of policing in Boston.

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what data will you use to evaluate police performance?

***POWELL:** I will evaluate police performance with data based on crime prevention, as well as data that would constitute whether the Police Department has been making a conscious effort to stop any form of profiling. At the same time, police performance will first and foremost come down to whether they are fulfilling their primary goal to serve and protect the people in the community, and I will ensure that they are given the bandwidth to do so.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you work to make Boston Police arrest data and stop-and-frisk data, including race information, available to the public in real time?

***POWELL:** Yes*

## 9. Community Oversight

While Boston has taken steps to allow for community review of civilian complaints against police officers, in the form of the Community Ombudsman Oversight Panel (CO-OP), the panel has limited power to hold officers accountable. The current CO-OP is made up of a former judge, and a former city employee. In their 2018 report, the members found that only 25 percent of cases that they reviewed were found to be not fair, not thorough, or both.<sup>13</sup>

If elected or reelected to the City Council, what steps will you take to increase accountability and community oversight over policing in our neighborhoods?

**POWELL:** *I will ensure that the community and the Police Department are more harmonious in their endeavors. The public should have easier and more effective communicative measures to file complaints, issues and requests with the Police Department and how it is handled. I will make sure that the Police Department is more accountable, but I will not handicap their methods of policing.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you support replacing the CO-OP with a well-funded, independent, community-based complaint review body with the power to subpoena, investigate, discipline, and fire police officers?

**POWELL:** *Yes*

In response to input from Boston community members, the Boston Police Department is in the process of implementing a limited body-worn camera program. Unfortunately, the program includes a dangerous provision allowing officers to review body camera footage before writing incident reports. Criminal defendants, on the other hand, do not have the same right to view incident footage before giving statements to police.

Please describe the role you think body cameras should play at the Boston Police Department.

**POWELL:** *Body cameras could be very important in determining police performance and collecting informational data on how police and those in contact with the police react to differing scenarios. The officers who have the body worn cameras should be allowed to review their footage, however the footage should also be reviewed by separate police officers, to determine whether the incident reports were properly written. We want to keep our police officers accountable, but we have to trust in our police officers to act as friends and protectors of our safety, not as enemies.*

If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you work to change the body-worn camera policy to prohibit officers from viewing footage prior to writing incident reports?

**POWELL:** *No*

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<sup>13</sup> City of Boston. (2018, July). Community Ombudsman Oversight Panel. Retrieved from [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2018/annual\\_report\\_2017\\_2016.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2018/annual_report_2017_2016.pdf).