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Our criminal justice system must be free from systemic racism. As a former prosecutor, I know it isn't.

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I've returned to William Faulkner's words, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," over and over since the murder of George Floyd.

In America, our past lives with us. It shapes us. It bears down on us in ways that are invisible to many Americans, especially white Americans, but painfully obvious to those who live under the heavy shadow of hundreds of years of injustice. Of course, our American story is not simply one of racial struggle. We've had triumphs and failures, adversity and sacrifice, and renewal so often spurred by immigrants to our shores. But no chapter of our story, honestly rendered, can ignore the anguish of racial injustice.

In recent months, millions of people — led by a rising, multi-racial generation of Americans — have summoned us to reckon with our history. That reckoning requires us to acknowledge that racial discrimination is embedded in many of the systems that have been handed down to us, including our criminal justice system. As a former prosecutor, I believe our criminal justice system must be

absolutely free from systemic racism to guarantee that Americans are, in fact, equal under the law.

As a former prosecutor, I know that it isn't.

This week, Connecticut took a small step in our reckoning by enacting a broad set of reforms to address systemic inequities in our criminal justice system and to improve policing across our state.

First, the law calls for an updated and comprehensive training program for current and new officers, including training on implicit bias. Unrecognized implicit bias hinders good police work and, over time, erodes trust between police and the communities they serve. Modernizing police training and educating officers to examine their own biases will benefit officers and every community in Connecticut. The law also provides behavioral health evaluations to officers who may be suffering.

Second, the law clarifies the manner in which officers may use physical force. In particular, the law restricts the use of choke holds, which can be lethal and which are rarely, if ever, the safest way of subduing a subject. The law makes explicit what most of us already expect of officers: that they use lethal force only when absolutely necessary, and intervene to protect a person who is being abused by another officer. The law also establishes an independent Inspector General within the State's Attorney's Office to investigate allegations of excessive use of force. This reform will inspire confidence that investigations of police misconduct are conducted credibly and fairly.

Third, the law establishes a standard for evaluating whether a person who has been injured by a police officer may seek relief in court. Under this standard, people whose constitutional rights have been violated must prove not only that

the offending officer deprived them of their rights but that he or she did so without an objective good faith belief that his behavior was lawful. In other words, for a lawsuit to proceed, it must be clear that the offending officer knew or should have known that he or she was breaking the law. This standard properly balances the reality that officers must often make difficult judgments in dangerous circumstances with the principle that all of us, especially police officers, must account for behavior we should know is wrong.

Taken together, these reforms and others represent real, meaningful progress.

As a prosecutor, I was mindful of the fearsome power of my office and the terrible consequences of its misuse. For that reason, I welcomed oversight. I wanted guardrails to guide the use of my authority. As powerful as prosecutors are, police officers are even more powerful because they can decide in an instant what happens to somebody's life. I hope my friends in law enforcement welcome this reform, because it will make them safer, better at their jobs and more respected by the communities they serve.

Our reckoning is underway. We must unite in this effort. On the other side lies the America that we are meant to be.

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