

Spurred by two controversial police use-of-force cases, Austin Mayor Steve Adler will announce Wednesday a new task force aimed at combating what he calls “institutional racism” citywide that will include dozens of representatives from business, education and criminal justice.

Adler has asked the panel to present recommendations by March about how to curtail inequalities in how people of color are treated.

“We will never be the city that we want to be, we will not be able to indefinitely preserve the spirit and the soul of this city, unless we fully take advantage of the potential that everyone in our community has,” Adler told the American-Statesman on Tuesday. “This effort is critical for the city.”

Adler cited the [February shooting of David Joseph](#), a naked unarmed teen who was shot and killed by officer Geoffrey Freeman, and the [violent arrest of teacher Breiaon King](#), which the Statesman first exposed in July, as reasons for the task force.

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Austin Mayor Steve Adler

Those incidents led to protests outside City Hall and demands from many in the community for city officials to continue putting police reforms in place.

The mayor is timing his announcement to coincide with a meeting this week of President Barack Obama’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, but Adler said he wants to address racial issues more broadly.

“I think it is critical that we do this measure of self-evaluation in order to be able to recognize what our challenges are, so that we can move forward,” Adler said. “Some of our systems are set up in a way that do not provide equal opportunity and access.”

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The task force will be broken into five working groups that look into topics such as health, with an eye to increasing access to wellness programs for all residents, and real estate and housing, aiming to remove systemic barriers to quality, affordable housing.

Adler said teams working on criminal justice issues will try to find ways to foster mutual respect between the police and community; those serving on the education working group will try to “identify, acknowledge and root out institutional racism ... that are barriers to all students having access to quality education and instruction;” and the team focused on banking and finance will try to make sure every business sees all Austin residents as potential employees.

The group will be co-chaired by Austin school Superintendent Paul Cruz and Huston-Tillotson University President Colette Pierce Burnette.

“To achieve the comprehensive solutions we need, we need to look at all facets of institutional racism,” Cruz said. “I will do my part and work with our task force to foster honest conversations and

to deliver actionable solutions to the mayor. It's not often you're asked to make real progress on one of our country's greatest challenges, and I welcome this opportunity."

Burnette was hired in April 2015 to lead Austin's historically black university.

"Ending institutional racism in Austin is an audacious goal that won't be accomplished by one task force working for a few months," Burnette said. "Doing this important and necessary work requires a long-standing and sincere commitment from the community. We are committed to doing this work for as long as it takes, but it begins here."

Adler was particularly vocal after learning about King's June 2015 arrest more than a year later, calling it "horrifying" and "disgusting."

### **VIDEO: Austin Mayor Adler discusses arrest of Breiaon King**

A video showed officer Bryan Richter pulling King from her car after a traffic stop and throwing her to the ground. A Travis County grand jury last week **declined to indict him on any charge**, but Chief Art Acevedo has said he is concerned about how Richter handled the case.

A separate video showed officer Patrick Spradlin, who drove King to jail on a resisting arrest charge that prosecutors later dismissed, telling her that blacks have "violent tendencies."

Officer Freeman was fired in the shooting of Joseph, who charged at him in the middle of the street. Freeman said he feared that the teen could overpower him and that his life was in danger.

**Acevedo has since fired Freeman**, saying that he used unreasonable force. Freeman is appealing, and a hearing before an arbitrator is set for early next month.

Religious leaders, business leaders, community advocates and local government officials are among those named today to Austin's new Task Force on Institutional Racism.

Mayor Steve Adler created the 49-member group to take a comprehensive look at institutional racism and make recommendations by March. The task force will be divided into five working groups: Criminal & Civil Justice; Education; Health; Finance, Banking & Industry; and Real Estate & Housing.

### **[RELATED: Austin Mayor Steve Adler creates city anti-racism panel](#)**

"Violent incidents involving our police officers and communities of color are – and should be – disturbing," Adler said in a prepared statement Wednesday, "but it became obvious when we committed to addressing them that this was a bigger problem than just how law enforcement interacts with African Americans. To deal with racism in Austin, we need to acknowledge that institutional racism exists in Austin, have an honest community conversation about what we can do to root it out, and then commit ourselves to actually do what it takes to make sure all Austinites have an opportunity to thrive."

Adler cited [the February shooting of David Joseph](#), a naked unarmed teen who was shot and killed by officer Geoffrey Freeman, and [the violent arrest of teacher Breiaion King](#), which the Statesman first exposed in July, as reasons for the task force.

The mayor said in a news conference Wednesday afternoon that addressing such issues is long overdue. That doesn't mean Austinities are racist, but "it does mean we have structures in place that create unjust and inequitable outcomes," he said.

The task force will focus on structural barriers — not individuals — both intentional and unintentional, he said. It will be disbanded after presenting an action plan to the community in March. Adler and the panel co-chairs, Colette Pierce Burnette, the president and CEO of Huston-Tillotson University, and Paul Cruz, the Austin schools superintendent, all declined to give examples of what that could include, saying they preferred to start with a blank slate for ideas.

Already, the announcement of the task force has "caused quite a bit of dust-up," Adler said. He attributed that to people not understanding what institutional racial barriers mean versus calling an individual a racist.

"It is my hope that after the work of this group, those words don't cause alarm and the same kind of defensiveness, but they signify a call to arms," he said. "But as I was coming into work today, every other person I ran into was asking 'Exactly what does this mean? Who are you going after?'"

In addition to Burnette and Cruz, the task force includes these 47 members:

- Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo
- Ashley Aliniz-Mayor of the Hispanic Scholarship Consortium
- Theresa Alvarez of Wells Fargo
- City of Austin Chief of Staff Ray Baray
- Juan Belman of the UT Immigrant Law Clinic
- Tony Budet from University Federal Credit Union
- Edna Butts from Austin ISD
- Kristian Caballero of the Travis County Commissioners Court
- Nancy Cardenas of the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
- Larry Coulter of The Lakeway Church
- Virginia Cumberbatch of the University of Texas at Austin
- Laura Donnelly from Latinitas Magazine
- Dr. Gregory Fenves, the president of the University of Texas at Austin
- Simone Talma Flowers of the Interfaith Action of Central Texas
- Rabbi Alan Freedman
- Nikki Graham of the Bank of America
- Jay Hailey from DLA Piper
- Kerry Hall from Texas Capital Bank
- Margaret Haule of Black Lives Matter Austin
- The Rev. Daryl Horton from Mt. Zion Baptist Church
- Clay Johnston, dean of the Dell Medical School

- Shannon Jones, the head of Health & Human Services for the City of Austin
- Dr. Peniel Joseph of LBJ School of Public Affairs
- Richard Jung of Austin's Asian-American Quality of Life Commission
- Dr. Mini Kahlon of Dell Medical School
- Ali Khataw of Austin Area Research Organization
- Nahi Khataw from Austin Community College
- Local attorney Ramey Ko
- Renee Lafair from the Anti-Defamation League
- Roberta Lang from Whole Foods
- Nelson Linder, head of Austin NAACP
- Judge Lora Livingston
- Carmen Llanes Pulido of Austin Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission
- Teddy McDaniel of Austin Urban League
- Brion Oaks, the City of Austin's first Chief Equity Officer
- Pastor Joseph Parker of David Chapel Missionary Baptist Church
- Jill Ramirez of Latino Healthcare Forum
- Dr. Richard Reddick of the University of Texas at Austin
- Dr. Richard Rhodes, President, Austin Community College
- Dr. Jane Rivera of La Raza Roundtable
- Alejandro Rueles from Latin Works
- Anna Sanchez from Wells Fargo
- Luz-Cristal Sanchez from Venture Lab
- community activist Jamelia "Meme" Styles of Measure Austin
- Ward Tisdale of the Real Estate Council of Austin
- Cynthia Valadez-Mata Sr. of League of United Latin American Citizens
- Dr. Emilio Zamora from the University of Texas at Austin