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COMMUNITY VOICES: What does 'safety' mean?

By Jasmene del Aguila Mar 4, 2019



Jasmene del Aguila

It is time for Kern County to understand the word “safety” in all of its essence.

With the passage of Measure N in November last year, the city of Bakersfield is expecting to bring in an additional \$50 million each year toward public safety. This measure passed with a mere 97 votes, and its language reads in part:

“To prevent cuts/improve 911 emergency response, police/fire protection, anti-gang/drug units, neighborhood police patrols; rapid response to assaults, robberies, gang violence, home burglaries; crime prevention; address homelessness; retain, attract jobs/businesses; unrestricted general revenue purposes; shall the measure be adopted approving an ordinance establishing a one-cent sales tax providing \$50,000,000 annually until ended by voters, requiring independent audits, citizens oversight.”

Regarding Measure N, voters made it clear that they simply don't feel safe. Safety is so much more than additional officers, more squad cars and beefed-up equipment. Absolutely folks want access to police and other officials when crimes are committed, but it's time to think upstream and solve the root causes that make a community feel unsafe. We have control over these causes, and by keeping these in check, we will cut crime and create healthy neighborhoods.

This is why it's time for Kern County to grasp the word “safety” in all of its essence. Safety takes on many different forms, from having access to safe drinking water, clean air to breathe, sidewalks and street lights, safe paths for children to get to and from school. Safety is access to parks, where families can spend quality time. Safety is also law enforcement, but officers need extensive cultural competency training and they should be a part and partner of the neighborhoods they serve. We need a new vision for a new world. The world is changing, and police practices — and how we view safety — need to change, too.

Too often, law enforcement is a reactionary tool to public safety. We need to be forward-thinking to create communities that are truly safe, and this happens with investment in prevention, like supporting affordable housing efforts to ensure that all folks are able to continue to afford to live in this county. We need to focus on infill development, to beautify, grow and keep existing communities blooming, instead of building new cities on the edge of town. Investment in communities makes a resident feel safe, protected and at home.

Unfortunately, this is not the reality for many community members within and outside of city limits. Historical disinvestment in patches of the county and city have created a sense of “othering,” because significant resources are flowing toward new development at the expense of existing neighborhoods. Many of these legacy neighborhoods don’t have access to clean drinking water, and families breathe unhealthy air. These communities don’t have access to parks and they lack lights and sidewalks. Meanwhile, they live under the stress of thinking whether they can pay rent this month.

As an east Bakersfield native born and raised, Mira Monte High School graduate and UC Berkeley alum, my hope is to see Bakersfield and Kern County prosper in ways that we could previously not imagine. We need to achieve city and county goals for economic growth, but in a way that doesn’t harm our most vulnerable communities, which already lack proper investment.

This is why I work for Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability. Leadership Counsel works with community leaders throughout the San Joaquin Valley and Eastern Coachella Valley to advocate for access to safe, affordable drinking water, basic transit services, wastewater services, decent affordable housing and to breathe clean air in neighborhoods that are filled with industries.

I work primarily in Kern County, along with my colleague, Adeyinka Glover. Through organizing, litigation, policy advocacy and research, we confront California’s stark inequalities that are manifested in too many of California’s low-income communities and communities of color.

Leadership Counsel believes and supports safety — what it means for families to feel safe, protected and healthy.

Families should come first, but it needs to be all families, all neighborhoods, all residents.

Jasmene del Aguila is a Bakersfield native and policy advocate with Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability, where she focuses on equal access to basic amenities for low-income communities.