

Holyoke chief rebukes city councilor for comparing police to a ‘gang’

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Holyoke Police Chief David Pratt

By [Dennis Hohenberger](#)

HOLYOKE — Police Chief David Pratt labeled a characterization of police by City Councilor Jose Maldonado-Velez as a “gang that comes out in force” both offensive and naïve. In a letter to council president Todd McGee, the chief said that Maldonado-Velez’s comment were “not only offensive to every member of the Holyoke Police Department, it’s extremely naïve to what services the Holyoke Police Department does provide the citizens of Holyoke on a daily basis.”

Attempts to reach Maldonado-Velez were unsuccessful.

Maldonado-Velez made the gang reference during the City Council’s Sept. 1 special meeting. The council was discussing a \$50,000 U.S. Department of Justice grant that would partly fund ShotSpotter, a system that identifies where a gunshot originated.

He said ShotSpotter was “predominantly targeting black and brown communities,” initiating a police response. “What it’s telling me is that it’s going to send more police to black and brown communities,” Maldonado-Velez said.

The council fell a vote short of accepting the no-match federal grant. However, the council approved a motion to table the grant for future consideration. Maldonado-Velez, Ward 6 Councilor Juan Anderson-Burgos, Ward 1 Councilor Jenny Rivera and Councilor At-large Israel Rivers voted “no.”

Only days after the vote, a weekend shootout was reported off Nonotuck Street that left one man dead. An estimated 30 shots were exchanged in the city’s Highlands neighborhood.

The chief found Maldonado-Velez’s attempt at minimizing the comment that “a gang was just a group of people” as “equally disturbing” to watch. Pratt cited Webster’s Dictionary, which defines a gang as a “group of persons working to unlawful or anti-social ends.”

Pratt added he was shocked a sitting councilor viewed the Police Department the same way as the Webster citation.

“The hard-working men and women of the Holyoke Police Department deserve better their elected officials,” Pratt stated, “who are supposed to work in conjunction with the Police Department and support us so that we can, in turn, provide the citizens of Holyoke with the best possible services.”

Pratt stated the department’s patrol officers and supervisors unions called for Maldonado-Velez to make a full retraction and publicly apologize to the department’s rank and file or have the councilor recuse himself from future votes tied to the Police Department, “as he has clearly shown a very public bias toward the Holyoke Police Department.”

The chief looked forward to McGee’s response “regarding this unfortunate situation.”

Contacted by phone, McGee said he reached out to Pratt and Maldonado-Velez.

“It’s a dangerous job and they do an excellent job representing this city and protecting our citizens. I thank them for that,” McGee said. “Sometimes things are discussed in the chamber that people have passion for, and things get heated.”

McGee expects councilors to respect one another, department heads, and city employees while working collaboratively and positively on behalf of Holyoke.

At the special meeting, Maldonado-Velez described the ShotSpotter presentation to the council’s Finance Committee as “fearmongering,” which included gun symbols to map gunshot locations in Holyoke neighborhoods.

The councilor pointed to his window and said shots were coming into his home. He added that ShotSpotter was a for-profit company tasked with finding gunshots and sending police officers to respond.

“It tells me they’re not actually in the business to keep us safe. They’re mostly in business to keep the cycle going,” Maldonado-Velez said. He continued that police departments were caught in a cycle of response and arrest.

Maldonado-Velez said the Holyoke Police Department was tasked with duties they are not meant to perform. “This (ShotSpotter) is not going to change that. We should be having a real conversation with what is exactly policing in our city,” he asked. “What is really public safety?”

In a “final thought,” Maldonado-Velez said the police are a literal gang, “to look out for each other and come up with force in our community... with force.” As a Latino growing up, he said he felt the police were not there to help him.

Ward 3 Councilor David Bartley said Maldonado-Velez’s gang comment was “one of the most irresponsible comments” he heard in 10 years on the council.

“To not give police tools, to limit the number of tools, to call them essentially a gang, that’s going to go unanswered and left hanging,” Bartley said. “That’s a low some comment.”

Maldonado-Velez also said the Police Department's job was to "react" to crimes, running counter to the community policing model instituted in 2011 by then police chief James Neiswanger. The model has remained in place through the tenure of chief Manny Febo and Pratt, both proponents.

The DOJ's website describes community policing as the following: "Community policing relies on collaborative partnerships between the law enforcement agency and the individuals and organizations they serve to develop solutions to problems and increase trust in police."

In addition, the Holyoke Police Department operates the Community Police Center on Race Street, a collaboration with the Behavioral Health Network and the Hampden County Sheriff's Department. Law enforcement team up with addiction specialist and mental health professionals.

In June, local police and the sheriff's office launched the Hope Through Help Initiative in the city's most troubled areas. The initiative was a street-level version of the Community Policing Center, with teams aiding persons struggling with addiction or mental health issues, again, a proactive approach.

Sans ShotSpotter, shots fired investigation must rely on human hearing, which cannot accurately determine a gunshot's location. Moreover, the reliance provides responding officers with only a general area.

When the system detects a gunshot, patrol officers and dispatch get a ShotSpotter alert that notes the shot's origin in one minute.

If enacted in Holyoke, ShotSpotter would cover a two-mile radius downtown. The \$50,000 grant would cover a one-mile radius with a second mile supported by federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars.