

**Statement of  
Joseph A. Puma  
before the Committee on Rules, Privileges and Elections  
Council Chambers, City Hall  
May 8, 2019**

Good morning, Speaker Johnson, Chair Koslowitz, and Members of the Committee on Rules, Privileges and Elections.

The last time I appeared before this Committee, in April 2016, the CCRB was in the midst of significant leadership transition. Despite the immense uncertainty of that period, I retained hope that the agency—including its very dedicated and capable staff—would rebound and even prosper once new leadership took the helm. I am happy to report and to bear witness to the reality that, three years later, the CCRB, despite its undeniable constraints and continued opportunities for improvement, is more equipped to fulfill and indeed has been fulfilling its Charter mandate more faithfully than at any other time I can recall over the past five years of my CCRB service.

During the past five years, I have had the unique opportunity to exercise fair-minded, hands-on, principled, and collaborative leadership during a time when vast swaths of the public and numerous leaders in government and law enforcement have looked to repair and improve police-community relations. During this time, I have seen the agency through five changes in the Board's Chair, an ad hoc Executive Committee that temporarily performed the duties of Chair when the agency had no one named, and three changes in Executive Director. At pivotal times, I have been able to shape the face of upper management by serving on committees to vet and advise selection on Executive Director, General Counsel, and Senior Adviser candidates, and by offering incoming Chairs or Acting Chairs perspectives and recent “institutional memory” as they transitioned into their roles.

Seeds that were sown in recent years, such as creation of the Administrative Prosecution Unit and the funding of outreach, training, and policy units, have borne and continue to bear fruit. The agency continues to be blessed with a highly capable staff that is dedicated to the agency's mission, and, in my experience, earnestly receives, solicits, considers, and, yes, even *voluntarily* implements suggestions for improvement from internal and external stakeholders.

One recent example of the latter is the Board's resolution to receive and investigate complaints of certain types of sexual misconduct, which the agency has begun in a first stage for cases it has deemed can be appropriately handled

within our existing resources and capacity. For years, the agency had been referring all sexual misconduct allegations to the NYPD's Internal Affairs Bureau, although there were strong cases being made that sexual misconduct falls under the CCRB's FADO jurisdiction. It was through community engagement, particularly with organizations that serve female victims of sexual violence and the LGBTQ community, that the agency began to consider this taking on these cases. It was the sense of the Board that such allegations fall under the agency's FADO jurisdiction, and I was a proud supporter of this long overdue reform. I firmly believe the CCRB should be an option for civilians to seek justice in these cases. I also strongly believe the agency would need more resources to adequately and responsibly investigate the more complex and sensitive "phase 2" sexual misconduct cases that it currently does not investigate.

This is just one, though certainly a significant, example of some the sweeping reforms that have resulted in historic gains for the agency in terms of its efficiency and effectiveness, and that have incrementally improved the perception of an agency which for much of its existence has not lived up to its full potential as an important and uniquely situated player in the City's police oversight landscape with potential to foster improved police-community relations. This unrealized potential has been notwithstanding the various, earnest efforts of scores of the agency's forbearers, staff and Board included, and also exacerbated by real setbacks and challenges over the years.

Although widespread "stop and frisk" has been abandoned as official practice due to its unconstitutionality and racially discriminatory impacts, although there have been moves to relax penalties for certain low-level offenses, and in spite of initiatives like the NCO program/"community policing" approach and the recent enactment of the Right to Know Act, it seems the public discussion has rightly turned to reforming the laws, mechanisms, and even the internal processes that could yield greater transparency and meaningful accountability regarding alleged police misconduct, including Charter reforms pertinent to the CCRB. All these efforts exist in a milieu of discourse and debate focused on questions and collective values such as how best to promote and maintain public safety, impacts on the day-to-day practice of law enforcement, creating better and more equitable outcomes for individuals and groups, upholding constitutional and civil rights, and understanding and initiating positive reforms to law enforcement and the criminal justice system holistically. If reappointed, I intend to help shape constructive policy, informed by stakeholder and CCRB staff input, regarding developments such as the NYPD's "blue-ribbon" panel's recommendations on the police disciplinary system, proposals and preparation for any Charter revisions affecting the agency,

possible Civil Rights Law 50-a reform/repeal in Albany (regarding the confidentiality of police personnel records), and efforts to reduce truncations and ensure more Police Department concordance with CCRB recommendations.

Since I began serving on the Board, I estimate I have reviewed over 2,500 cases. I bring an engaged, fair-minded, hands-on, and collegial approach to working with fellow board members and staff. I bring an open mind, sensitivity, and compassion to my review of cases which bear real-world consequences for police officers and civilians alike.

My perspective and life experience as a community advocate, lifelong public housing resident of Manhattan, and as an Ivy-educated, openly gay, bicultural, Latino-identified, cisgendered man, has aided the agency in its outreach efforts, for example, to NYCHA communities, Manhattan communities, LGBTQ-serving organizations, and other community-based organizations. My previous experience as a civil rights paralegal, budget and policy analyst, and intergovernmental liaison, has enriched internal conversations about topics such as the budget and legislative process and has helped the CCRB forge new contacts with partners in government and the community. My longtime involvement with the community-based organization Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) sensitizes me to the social forces that can lead to displacement of the most vulnerable, low- and moderate income, mostly of-color, residents of neighborhoods all over New York City. I am currently seeking professional opportunities in the not-for-profit and private sectors, or for self-employment, after having earned a Master's degree from Union Theological Seminary in 2017. My Master's thesis explored issues of the stigmatization and criminalization of public housing and its residents. I have lived, experienced, and struggled with these pressures myself, and still do. I care deeply about forging spaces for healing, understanding, justice, and reconstruction of the fractured self.

As frontline public servants in their communities, Council Members have been vital partners in spreading the message of the CCRB, inviting the agency to events in their districts and distributing our informational literature in multiple languages. I am pleased that, under Speaker Johnson's leadership, the Council has continued its partnership with the CCRB in its Community Partners Initiative, which began during the tenure of former Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito. The Community Partners Initiative allows members of the public to access CCRB services during special evening office hours in five participating Council Members' district offices throughout the city, where community members can file complaints, give sworn statements, and obtain information about the CCRB, without needing to travel to the CCRB's lower Manhattan office during normal business hours. I am grateful to the participating Council

Members in this partnership: Council Members Ayala, Gibson, Richards, Rose, and Cornegy. My gratitude also goes out to several other Council Members not listed here who participated in earlier phases of this initiative, and those who would like to explore future participation.

You are well aware that the City Council only recently achieved its full complement of CCRB members with the appointment of a Staten Island representative after a 4-year vacancy. I am pleased to sit alongside Mr. Nathan Joseph as you consider our reappointments today. I might add that in addition to being a thoughtful and engaged Board Member who quickly embraced the role and responsibilities of CCRB member, he has one of the best last names anyone can have besides "Puma."

All humor aside, I was deeply honored to receive news in December 2018 of the Manhattan Delegation of the City Council's wish to reappoint me as their designee on the CCRB. My last reappointment in May 2016 left me with a little over 2 years in my term, which expired on July 4, 2018. Per the City Charter, CCRB Board Members serve terms of 3 years. The Public Officers Law permits certain appointed officials to serve in their official roles beyond their stated terms until a replacement is named.

Seeking reappointment has afforded me the opportunity to review and validate my unique contribution to and commitment to helping the CCRB fulfill its Charter mandate. Again, I was quite humbled to receive the renewed support of the Manhattan Delegation as their potential designee, and would be most grateful for the support of this Committee and the full Council in recommending me to the Mayor for reappointment.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.