

News Release

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Durham Announces New Co-Chair and Members of Community Safety and Wellness Task Force *Task Force to Recommend Services and Programs as Alternatives to the Criminal Legal System*

DURHAM, N.C. – City of Durham Mayor Steve Schewel, Durham County Board of Commissioners Chair Brenda Howerton, and Durham Public Schools Board of Education Chair Bettina Umstead announced today that Xavier Cason will join Marcia Owen to co-chair the [Durham Community Safety and Wellness Task Force](#). Cason is director of Community Schools and School Transformation with the Durham Public Schools Foundation, and Owen is a long-time community justice advocate.

The Task Force is composed of the co-chairs and 15 additional members appointed by the three local governing bodies. The Task Force was formed by the governing bodies with a mission to recommend programs, “to enhance public safety and wellness that rely on community-based prevention, intervention, and re-entry services as alternatives to policing and the criminal legal system.”

“As a former Durham Public Schools board member and teacher, Xavier has served at various levels in the education field for most of his life, and is currently a Ph.D. student at N.C. State studying education evaluation and policy analysis. He will bring a unique perspective as we move forward,” said Mayor Schewel. “I’m also excited we have built a task force with thoughtful community stakeholders and leaders who have a strong interest in ensuring that Durham has alternative options available, beyond just the criminal legal system, to promote community safety.”

“I am looking forward to hearing from our community and engaging with this task force to examine the many factors that intersect with the overall wellness and safety of our community,” said Task Force Co-Chair Cason.

“Mr. Cason’s breadth of leadership in public education, his dedication to our most vulnerable students and families, and his passion for problem-solving are a perfect combination of qualities to fulfill our mission. Mr. Cason is an esteemed, lifelong learner and educator. I look forward to being his colleague and student,” said Task Force Co-Chair Owen.

In addition to Owen and Cason, members of the Task Force are: City appointees – Isaac Villegas, Jesse Huddleston, Shanise Hamilton, Jennifer Carroll and Cynthia Fox; County appointees – Tyler Whittenberg, Mike Sstrom, Jatoia Potts, Mangala Rajendron; and Durham Public Schools appointees – Alec Greenwald, Tonya Williams Leathers, Nori McDuffie Williams, Samuel Scarborough, and Dr. Wanda Boone. One remaining spot is to be filled by the County.

Chair Howerton added, “We are grateful for these passionate community members who have stepped up to develop innovative solutions to reduce the level of gun violence we’re seeing. By having them be a part of the conversation, we have a better chance to make real change and save lives.”

“The creation of the Community Safety and Wellness Task Force comes at a much-needed time as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic as well as increased gun violence,” said Chair Umstead. “I know that the Task Force can craft collaborative and community-rooted solutions that will serve Durham well. I look forward to listening, learning, and implementing solutions.”

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