



Podcast Transcript "Social Justice"

Recorded: October 28, 2020

Moderator: Colorado State Senator Julie Gonzales

Panelist: Ken McNeely, President of AT&T West

Voiceover: Welcome to the [Women In Government Podcast](#). Whether discussing important issues or policies of the day, this is the place where lawmakers and decision-makers unite to get the conversation started.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Our country has been at unrest for quite some time now. But it seems like everything came to a head the moment an African American man took his last breath while in police custody. George Floyd's untimely death in Minneapolis, Minnesota, sparked outrage all across the United States, resulting in protests and cries for police reform. At times, it may seem like no one is listening. But a group of high-power chief executives of almost 200 large companies are working hard to move the needle when it comes to real change.

Hi, I'm Colorado State Senator Julie Gonzales. Thank you for listening to the latest Women In Government podcast. On this episode, we're talking about one of the hottest topics in our country -- social justice. Joining the conversation is Ken McNeely, President of AT&T West. In 2013, Ken received the Black Business Association's 'Top 100 African Americans in Technology' award; in 2014, the Vanguard Award from Equality California; and in 2017, the Luminary Award from Our Family Coalition.

Ken McNeely: Thank you, Senator, I'm so happy to be with you today.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Before we get started, I'd like to thank everyone for listening. Don't forget to subscribe to, like, or share our podcast. You can also email us by visiting womeningovernment.org.

It's almost impossible to go a single day without hearing or seeing something about the Black Lives Matter movement. George Floyd's death sparked outrage and the public is demanding change from those in power. This includes business leaders who are under extraordinary pressure to do more than just pledge their support via social media, but rather, to take action to combat systemic racism.

AT&T's Executive Chairman, Randall Stephenson, has been a consistent advocate for equity and social justice. This summer, he helped start and lead a committee on criminal justice reform for the [Business Roundtable's Taskforce on Racial Equality and Justice](#). Ken, thank you so much for joining us. Can you explain why it's important for business leaders to speak out on issues of equity and justice?

Ken McNeely: Sure, Senator Gonzales, thank you. And thank you for engaging in this important conversation. Many of us were profoundly impacted by the death of George Floyd, and it really resonated throughout the halls of corporate America, in part because many of us manage significant African American workforce. And indeed, we are, many of us, African American leaders. It's really difficult for us to be able to step into the halls of our corporations and leave our personal lives behind,



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and so, we brought that emotional grief and that pain inside the corporate walls, and so did many of our employees.

To not respond to this outcry, to not respond to social unrest that we were seeing in America would have been really tone deaf for many corporations. I was really happy to see our CEO Randall Stephenson really step up and take a leadership role, and really urge corporate America to take a stand and take a position, and to really step forward and to use its resources and personnel to impact change in the public policy arena.

Our employees expected it. They demanded it. There was a sensitivity to their feelings, and I think being empathetic corporate leaders, we were required to take some type of action and to recognize the real pain that was going through our communities.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Your CEO recently said in a [CNBC interview](#): "We have a big problem, and it needs to be dealt with."

And that quote really highlights the fact that your company, and many others have, just as you mentioned, large African American employee bodies. And because of that, it's time to speak out and take action, including working with us as policymakers and political leaders to deal with this issue head-on.

The list of people that are part of the BRT, [The Business Roundtable](#), is impressive. Mary Berra of General Motors, Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan Chase, Alex Gorsky, of Johnson and Johnson, just to name a few. Given that BRT, what policy recommendations have emerged out of that Business Roundtable Taskforce?

Ken McNeely: When Randall started the work at the Business Roundtable, it was really an attempt to look at some broad overlaying principles that we could take to Congress and really urge our federal colleagues and policymakers to implement some type of national framework. They really focused on some specific areas around transparency and some minimum standards of police conduct, significantly around de-escalation but also around data and collecting data around what's happening. If we can't measure it, it's really hard to figure out what the right solution is going to be to the problem, and once we have that data, and we can measure those results, to really hold law enforcement accountable for these actions.

The work of the subcommittee at the Business Roundtable led to these broad principles, and the hope was that we could really get Congress to focus on some actions. But given the difficulty that Congress is having these days in really resolving any type of dispute, it was then decided that if we can't get national or federal legislation passed this particular calendar year, that we'd look at what kind of incremental movement can we make at the state and local level.



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So, we actually took a quick pivot, and fortunately, we were able to bring a number of our business allies with us to the state and local level to look for opportunities for reform at the state and municipal level. And we've had some great success there.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: It's so important to be able to work at both the federal and state level and find opportunities where you can find commonalities and solutions. Can you explain a little bit more about those particular police reform principles that the Business Roundtable has adopted?

Ken McNeely: We really wanted to lead with transparency because it was so incredibly important for the community to have a real respect for the kind of data that was being produced from law enforcement around the country. So, we looked at transparency and knew that many different states and many municipalities were at different points down this journey, and we came in with the recommendations to really shine a light on this trust factor that many communities had with policing data.

We really wanted to make sure that our recommendations included one that would make this data available for public consumption. That was one of the leading items because we wanted to really instill trust back into law enforcement so that the entire community could feel safe, understanding that data was being used in a way that would lead to genuine reform.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Ken, your CEO was recently [quoted](#) as saying:

"We're refocusing our efforts to create more opportunities and paths to success for Black and underserved communities, building on our long-standing work to create economic prosperity for all in this country."

It really seems like your team is working hard to be on the right side of social justice. So, given that, how can businesses like AT&T help empower Black and marginalized communities?

Ken McNeely: That's a great question, Senator. One of the things that we realized is that it's more than simply the policy arena and changing public policy that needs to happen in order to ensure real equality for Black and Brown communities across the country.

And then, we also looked at: 'how can we engage community-based organizations and other allies to help us with this work?' I think we kind of look at it from a very holistic standpoint. Once we can regain trust in our communities around law enforcement and try to address from a policy standpoint some of these systemic problems and challenges that we face, how can we then support economic empowerment so that communities are feeling as if these companies are listening?

And so, working hand in glove with community-based organizations who are also doing wonderful work, but helping them really go into the community and expand the work that they are doing with support



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from our philanthropic arms and our corporate sustainability groups - that's one way we could really double down and really make a difference.

As we're in their communities, and we're asking for change, we have to turn the mirror on ourselves as well because we need to look at ourselves. Are we doing what we need to do internally within our companies to ensure that we're creating an equitable workplace? Because that's no better place to really start with in economic empowerment than to ensure that your own house is in order. We're certainly trying to do that at AT&T, where we've adopted a rule of transparency around diversity and inclusion numbers so that we understand where we stand, and more importantly, where we need to devote our resources because we have work to do.

I think that it's an open and honest communication about that, and we've encouraged these difficult conversations - but that's the start, that's a great first start. We challenge all of our other allies and peer corporations to do the same thing because economic empowerment starts at home, and then we can take that into the community.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: I really do believe that the same way corporate America has work to do, we also have work to do inside of our legislatures to ensure that the voices of Black and Brown communities are heard, but that we're also working to elect more Black and Brown leaders to public office. And so more on that point, I'm curious how AT&T is engaging with communities, and how you're offering economic opportunities and upward mobility?

Ken McNeely: You know, one of the things that we've realized is that we can't continue to do the same thing and expect different results. We found that we really need to rethink how we are reaching into the community, looking at potential employees, and ensuring that once hired, that they can rise up the ranks of the company.

We've initiated some programs that we think really help us in this way. We have doubled down on our focus at historically Black institutions and institutions of higher education with significant Latinx populations to ensure that we can have incoming employee groups that better reflect the vast diversity of America. And we're challenging other technology companies to do the same thing because they tend to recruit at certain locations, and these locations aren't always representative of the general population. Yet, the kinds of skills that we need, quite frankly, today are as varied as possible. And really to compete in the current environment, we need to bring as many lived experiences to the table as possible.

We live in a world where work is centered around collaboration and cooperation and really understanding these different lived experiences of our constituents, of our consumers. I think the best way of addressing that great diversity of America is to have that diversity represented around the table so that people who are making these decisions about products and services reflect that kind of diversity and lived experiences that's better reflective of our country. And I think that even from just a competitive standpoint, companies see this as a business imperative. We need that talent, we need that



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diverse lived experience, that diverse lens of experience, that great journey reflected at our decision-making table. And so, I think that's driving corporations to do the right thing for many, many reasons.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Just to continue on, in the same way that you are having this conversation in corporate America, we too, within our policy-making tables are having a really similar conversation. Looking at the [AT&T website](#), right now, you go to the website, and it says in all capital letters: 'WE STAND FOR EQUALITY.' It continues on with some great language, "Black Lives Matter. And we have a moral and business obligation to engage on this fundamental issue of equality and fairness."

There's really a running theme of driving change for social justice, both outside and inside of the company. And so, Ken, beyond C-suite level leadership, what steps is AT&T taking to advance racial equity and social justice goals internally?

Ken McNeely: I'm glad you brought up our corporate website because standing for equality really undergirds all that we're doing. I mean, it's one of our founding values. I think in order to impact change in the public policy arena, and in fact continue that journey of change internally, we have to start with some moral authority.

I think that the reason we've been successful, both externally and internally, is that we have this historical presence of standing for what's right. Back in the early 20s, we were one of the first companies to hire women and bring them into the workplace and see that success in the 40s and 50s - and then subsequently, in the civil rights movement to increase our employees of color. I mean, we've had this long-standing history of standing for equality.

I think that that gives us some type of moral authority to really be able to make some of the changes and ask the right questions externally. But I think internally, we continue to question: 'How we can be our best? And how can we even get better at doing some of the things that we'd like to see?'

I think understanding that really requires what our leaders have said, and that is that we have as our founding values standing for equality, and I think that having that as a significant pillar of what it is that we do and everything that we stand for helps us make the right decisions internally.

And then, holding people accountable - making sure that they understand that as a founding value of the company, that that's part of their evaluation. That's part of how we determine success and ensuring that diversity inclusion is infused in what we do. And it's especially important now, and I think that particularly with younger employees coming in, they demand that their employer be socially responsible and be a good corporate citizen. It really becomes that differentiator for them.

So, I think we all become challenged to do this as we want to attract the best talent, and I think that this pushes us all in the right direction. I'm very pleased the way things are headed, and I know that we're not dipping our toe in this -- we're actually diving in headfirst, and that we want to be leaders in this area as we go forward.



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Sen. Julie Gonzales: Speaking of diving in headfirst, your SVP (Senior Vice President) of Corporate Social Responsibility, and Chief Sustainability Officer Charlene Lake has said that your team: ["...learned early on that we can make a big impact by listening to our employees on the ground, about where and how best to help in a given market."](#)

She was speaking about national workforce readiness programs. I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit more about this, and explain how you're supporting a diverse employee workforce during these challenging times.

Ken McNeely: Typically, corporate philanthropic efforts tend to have a global reach, and high aspirations, and national programs. We realized early on that we have a significant workforce of 250,000 employees spread all over the country, and we've challenged them all to be engaged in their communities.

But we weren't always listening to what they were telling us. We realized early on that we have great ambassadors out there in, living, working in the communities that have their finger on the pulse of our communities, that they understand what our communities value. So, we started listening to them, and we ask them specific questions about: 'How do we get engaged in your community? How do we make a difference in your community? How do we understand what your community is expecting of their corporate leaders?'

We started getting support for community-based organizations, and we were really surprised by the real thirst of our employees to be actively engaged. So, we created a national program called [Believes](#), and it was about believing in the community. But it was as much about having our employees engaged in the community, because they would bring up certain organizations and certain activities that they wanted to engage in, all around a common theme of economic development, or education and economic well-being.

We were really surprised at the success of the program, and the Believes campaign has been one of our signature events as we engage very locally - and it looks differently from every city to every state - but it's driven by our desire to be engaged and connected to our community and to understand what's valued in that community and provide both financial resources and personnel resources to help support that objective.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Thank you for sharing that with us. For all of those who are listening in, prior to Ken's latest position, he served as President of AT&T, California from 2005 – 2018, and he held the role of Vice President of Law and Government Affairs at AT&T from 2000 – 2005 after joining the company, initially in 1991, as a senior attorney specializing in corporate litigation.

I bring up that history of your different roles within the company because I think it's safe to say that you probably had some help along the way. So, I'm curious if you can talk about the role that mentorship has played for you personally, both in terms of being mentored, as well as being a mentor yourself?



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Ken McNeely: I think that navigating a large corporate bureaucracy is almost impossible without good mentorship, and as I joined the company as a young lawyer, it was incumbent upon me to kind of navigate this kind of morass of rules and internal politics and external politics. When you're put in that kind of environment, it's important to find a mentor or two or three if you can. Sometimes in a large work environment, you may find a manager that has a special interest in one particular area, and then another with a special interest in another area, but together you combine all of that wisdom and experience, and that helps you navigate your journey through corporate America.

I think that's so important that people be willing to aspire but also to reach back and to pull that ladder behind you. I've been with the company now for almost 20 years, and I see my responsibility even to start to reach down and to mentor other younger managers behind me and help them navigate the changing waters. We are now working in a corporate environment that's drastically changing, and 2020 has been one of those years that has changed almost by definition - this is our new normal.

Being able to navigate through all of this, and understand what's important, to lean into adversity, and to understand where opportunity might rest, is not easily discovered by those just entering the business. I think it's incumbent upon us who have been here for a while to help interpret the landscape for those coming behind us and particularly for those of us of color who may not see ourselves reflected in large numbers in senior ranks. I think that we have an added responsibility to look for young, aspiring managers of color and women and give them the advice and counsel that we had and benefited from to be able to rise up in the organization.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: According to the [AT&T commitment](#), quote: "Our society doesn't work if it doesn't work equally for all." The company is currently working with civil rights organizations, and additionally, they're on the ground in many communities addressing education, workforce, and the other needs of underserved communities, including the Black community. They say that they'll continue to learn from their employees, the community, and other businesses.

Ken, I'd like to add another group into the equation -- what are some of the ways that business can learn from government, in terms of ensuring diverse talent, like race and gender, is nurtured and promoted?

Ken McNeely: One of the things that I think that we can learn from government is that it casts a very broad net for its entry-level employees. I think that oftentimes, large corporations, and particularly on the technology side, become very narrowly focused on 'what is the right qualification for entry level,' and it tends to be one or two elite institutions. When we start to think about the entry-level work that's required of these corporations, I think that government does a much better job at understanding what are those entry level qualifications for employees to come in, and they cast a much wider net than the business community.

I think that we could do a better job of assessing the necessary skills and where that kind of training for those skills can come from because I do think that we have a number of elite institutions that are overrepresented in our numbers. We know that many institutions of higher learning are producing great



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candidates who could excel in our institutions, that better reflect the great diversity of our country. And I think the government does a much better job of that.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: That is super fascinating. On the flip side, what do you think that we in government can learn from business?

Ken McNeely: I think that one of the things that businesses do well is that once you're in the door, being able to provide continuing education, the training, the experience that you get, the mentoring capability, or opportunity that we talked about earlier. I think that businesses understand that once we've made that initial investment of bringing a great talent into the enterprise, it's our obligation, it's our responsibility, and it's to our financial benefit to nurture - to grow that talent - and have him or her succeed in the enterprise.

I think that businesses do a great job overall, ensuring that we grow the talent, that we continue to educate, and give different opportunities to our best and brightest and have them come up through the ranks of the corporation. I think that's something that the public sector could do a better job at. I know that many folks tend to feel that they're trapped in the bureaucracy and don't necessarily have the opportunity for upward mobility, nor feel that they're being educated and trained for opportunities that might arise in the public sector as they build their career.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: If you were to ask me, even three years ago, if I would have ever considered running for office, I would have laughed at you because I never saw myself in this position -- but here I am. And to that point, I think the more we see ourselves reflected in positions of political leadership or corporate leadership, we have to continue that work.

As we've been discussing, it's essential for business leaders to focus their social justice efforts internally and externally. A great example is the work being done in [Chicago](#), supporting existing education and skills-building programs in communities impacted by high unemployment and violence.

Another example is work being done in Dallas, where [70% of the homeless population is Black](#). I see AT&T plans to continue their support of organizations focused on reducing the number of people being displaced from their homes.

And finally, in Birmingham, work continues on education disparities for at risk youth. That's just some of the work being done on the outside. And so now I'd like to focus on internal efforts; Ken, what best practices are helping AT&T's efforts to succeed when it comes to hiring, recruiting, and developing women and minorities across all levels: C-suite, executive, and senior-level officials and managers?

Ken McNeely: It starts with some of the things that you've referenced - understanding, creating a great place to work. I think part of creating a great place to work is understanding that we don't work in a vacuum. When we did go into the office, we didn't go into the office and close the world out behind us. I think AT&T really understands that our employees come to work with their communities, with their



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families, with their faith-based organizations, with what makes them themselves. And I think that that's important because it helps us stay grounded, and it helps the company stay connected to the communities where our employees work and live, and our customers work and live -- and that provides for a very enriching work environment.

But to your point about, 'What do we do to ensure that women and managers of color can make their way up to the organization?' It's part of what you alluded to as well, and that is this concept of seeing oneself reflected. I believe very strongly about the concept of windows and mirrors - that we need to see ourselves reflected in the mirror and for us to understand that, yes, we too can achieve certain things. It's important that women and managers of color are able to see themselves reflected, to understand that we can achieve these things. I think that that's incumbent in leadership in large companies, and AT&T as well, that those of us who have achieved, who are out there, and who are making ourselves visible, and we are mentoring folks, as well.

But I also think it's important to have those windows, and what I mean by windows is that people need to be able to see through the window people that don't look like them, and have a varied experience, because it is as important for them to understand and to see a different life experience. We strive to create empathetic leaders, and we want people to understand and be able to see the world through someone else's eyes, so that they understand exactly the motivations and the concerns - and I think that makes us much better leaders.

I think that the fact that we evaluate on empathy is different for corporate America, but so important to create an environment where people feel that they can be their authentic selves and they can bring their full selves to work. Their lived experiences, as varied and different as they are, are valued, and there's something to be added to the table.

One of my mentors told me that the very thing that you could be trying to tamp down - that thing, whatever it is that you feel that you need to hide to fit in - might be the very thing your organization needs to succeed. It could be your value add; it could be your secret sauce. And so, it's so important to honor those differences, to raise them up, and to celebrate them because those are the very things that the organization might need to succeed.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: That's so important. I think it's becoming quite clear the power that socially conscious business leaders can have on communities all across the country, particularly when it comes to social justice and equality. Sometimes these leaders and their organizations support legislation that aligns with their own priorities. How can policymakers, local, state and federal, support the fight for racial justice and equity?

Ken McNeely: I think that the work that we started around the Business Roundtable and our allied corporations in this effort has been well received by policymakers. I think it's been refreshing - the policymakers have responded very positively, not always agreeing with us, but excited that we're at the table, that we're part of the discussion - that it's not just about profits.



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It's about creating environments where our employees and our customers can be safe and comfortable and thrive in their communities. I think that companies being part of that conversation is refreshing and different, and I think that now that we're part of it, I don't think we can turn back -- and I don't think we will turn back. I think that we realize that this is what our employees, what our customers want us to be involved in, these conversations. I think that policymakers are receiving it well, and again, not always agreeing with our positions, but excited that we're part of the conversation.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: In California, there are multiple policies under consideration that AT&T is supportive of. AB 2054 creates a pilot program, administered by the California Office of Emergency Services, to provide financial support to community organizations responding to emergency issues, such as substance abuse, mental health disturbances, and domestic violence. AB 1299 will help make sure that local police departments don't hire problematic officers with a history of serious misconduct, and AB 1196 would make it illegal for officers to use the 'carotid hold' to detain a suspect. Ken, can you explain why these three pieces of legislation are so important?

Ken McNeely: We looked at some of the legislation around police reform that California was considering, and here in California, we have a very large employee population of about 40,000. When we looked at the different kinds of reform that the legislature was considering, we aligned that with the recommendations of the Business Roundtable, and we were able to quickly point to some that were certainly right-aligned with some of the recommendations, and we engaged full-throttle on supporting those pieces of legislation.

One of the really fascinating things, Senator, was when we started to pay visits to members of the legislature, as I stated before, they were so surprised but appreciative of us being there, and for us to speak on behalf of our employees because again, we have standing because we want our employees to be able to live and work in communities where they feel safe. And as I shared earlier, after the George Floyd murder, we were profoundly impacted by that. And it did impact our employees - it impacted me.

So, our employees really were excited that we would go and voice their concerns in the halls of the legislature, and when we asked our employees if they were willing to write letters to support certain bills, we saw numbers of participation we had never seen before. We had upwards of 40% of the employees that we asked to write their respective legislators agree to write and they agreed to do it. They moved forward with it. We've never seen that kind of response before.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Absolutely, and I would be remiss if I didn't also mention the policies that we worked on here in Colorado. I was honored to serve on the Senate State Affairs Committee, to hear Senate Bill 217 in Colorado, which changed Police Department practices for the good of the entire state. That was an incredible piece of bipartisan legislation that brought together folks from all sides of the political spectrum, all sides of the law enforcement community, and it happened while Black Lives Matter protesters were literally outside of the Capitol, while we were in the building debating this policy. Recently, your President of AT&T Colorado, Roberta Robinette, wrote [an op-ed](#) which appeared



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in *the Gazette*, and she said that we must never forget the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbury, and Rayshard Brooks. So why did this bill mean so much to AT&T?

Ken McNeely: Well, first, let me congratulate you and the members of the Colorado legislature for that work. It really set a tone across the country, and I cite it regularly to support the work that can be done for reform. So, congratulations on that accomplishment.

It was important to us because you are one of the first state efforts to really tackle reform in a meaningful way. And Roberta, representing AT&T in Colorado, was right on point, and we were very supportive of her efforts to make sure that the community understood where we stood as a corporation - fighting the fight for our employees to be able to live in communities where they didn't fear for their lives and appreciated this kind of reform. We wanted to provide the full thrust of our brand and our resources behind this effort, and it was very important for us to be able to make a statement and to show the support for the legislators who were really taking a leadership role in moving the agenda on police reform. So again, congratulations on that.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: Thank you. I think it just underscores, again, the concept that you had mentioned earlier around windows and mirrors. The fact that the Black and Latino caucuses were able to come together to be the prime sponsors of that effort, in passing Senate Bill 217 here in Colorado - that really demonstrates what we can achieve when we do work together. And so, as we wrap up, Ken, do you have a key takeaway or closing comments for our listeners, whether they're policymakers or someone who is interested in social justice reform?

Ken McNeely: One of the things I've always said is that these are difficult conversations oftentimes, and it's so incredibly important that we listen. After the death of George Floyd, I wrote a reflections piece on AT&T website about reflections on race, and I talked about how important it was for our managers to listen to each other - and not to listen to agree or disagree, but to listen to understand. I think that's so incredibly important as we build out empathetic leaders, which is what we all should aspire to be.

And so, my closing remarks would simply be that we all need to listen more. We need to listen, again, not to agree to disagree, but to understand each other, to understand that we all have lived experiences, and we all take in this great world differently based on our upbringing, based on our own experiences, and they may not be shared by others - but they're profoundly impactful on those that do experience them, so just listen.

Sen. Julie Gonzales: I really appreciate that. It's through listening that we're better able to understand each other's perspectives. And when we understand each other, we're able to take actions that improve everyone's lives, whether that's in the corporate world, or in the political world. Ken, I just want to thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me and sharing your perspectives.

Ken McNeely: Thank you. I've really enjoyed chatting today.



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Sen. Julie Gonzales: We'll never forget their names: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbury, and Rayshard Brooks. Thankfully, people in influential positions are working with civil rights organizations, law enforcement, elected officials, and other businesses on the local, state, and federal levels, pushing for change that addresses injustices in law enforcement.

Once again, I'd like to thank AT&T's Ken McNeely for providing all of his insights. I'd also like to thank all of the listeners for taking the time to hear this important discussion. Don't forget to subscribe to, like, or share our podcast. You can also email us by visiting womeningovernment.org.

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