



**KARUNA CENTER FOR
PEACEBUILDING
and
CRITICAL CONNECTIONS
with**



League of Women Voters / Springfield
Symposium Series: Building Inclusive Communities

Improving Relations Between Law Enforcement and Communities of Color

May 25th, 2018

Holyoke Community College

Symposium Summary and Key Takeaways

Keynote Address

Rahsaan Hall, *ACLU of Massachusetts*

Summary

The narrative around public safety and crime in the United States is racially tinged and People of Color are disproportionately overrepresented in a negative light within it. This narrative is supported by the same power structures that allowed for slavery. After slavery was abolished, these same structures paved the way for further violence and discrimination to continue in different forms: the Jim Crow era, separate-but-equal policies, redlining, blockbusting, white flight, the current criminal justice system, and so on.

The challenge is to abolish the current systems of incarceration and policing as they exist today and to envision something different that accounts for universal freedom. This new vision will provide space for systemic change to occur in order to create a new reality. While we work toward this future, efforts can be made to improve and shift the current reality. In many communities, hurt people hurt people. We therefore need to take a trauma-informed approach to improve the criminal legal system and move from retributive to rehabilitative forms of justice. We need more mental health services available, more drug treatment options, more jobs training, more educational opportunities, more re-entry support, and more restorative justice

“When we define our reality in terms, language, and actions that break the manacles of inevitability and charge headlong into a future that is rooted in the constitutional principles of freedom, liberty, equality, due process, and justice; when we center ourselves in the principles that grow out of healthy communities, that heal broken people; when we invest in people and their futures instead of their deficiencies; we will look back at this moment in history and proclaim that we refused to be imprisoned and policed by systems of social control and oppression, and we have realized our vision.” -Rahsaan Hall, keynote address

options. Meanwhile, four concrete steps that can be implemented now to improve the criminal legal system include:

1. Diversification of law enforcement agencies;
2. Body-worn cameras, accompanied by strong policies requiring strong privacy protections;
3. Data analysis (e.g. arrests data) and data-driven policies;
4. Community engagement

Panel I: Initiatives in Accountability and Outreach - Law Enforcement Perspectives

Panelists

David Sullivan - MA Northwestern District Attorney

Edward W. Caisse III - Hampden County Sheriff's Department

Brian Beliveau - Springfield Police Department

Gary Berte - Springfield College

Moderator

Linda Matys O'Connell - League of Women Voters / Springfield

Summary

The four panelists discussed their roles in improving the relationship between the law enforcement agencies they represent and the communities in which they work. As they individually held different positions in different institutions, panelists' roles and initiatives varied. There were however common themes threaded throughout the discussion. Humanization, empathy, and collaboration were the three most prominent and consistent themes across the panel.

Lt. Beliveau spoke to the need for the law enforcement community to rehumanize their views of the communities and community members they serve. The tendency to distance yourself as an officer from the community you are policing can be harmful. Lt. Beliveau and the Springfield Police Department use the C3 policing model, a more community-centered method of policing. While this model and other efforts to shift toward community policing were lauded, Mr. Berte pushed back expressing that if law enforcement isn't practicing a community-centered policing model, then you ought to reexamine what you're doing. The panelists also expressed the other side of humanization, asking for community members to try to rehumanize their views of police officers and other law-enforcement officials.

This two-way humanization requires both empathy and collaboration. Mr. Berte emphasized the importance of working together and communicating. Lt. Beliveau shared his experience of becoming more aware and sensitive to the cultural difference between groups. He explained the importance of seeking to understand other cultures and in turn tailoring your policing model to the culture and community. DA Sullivan further expressed that in order to collaborate, both law enforcement and community members have to be honest about the ways they may have messed up and need to work toward a relationship of mutual respect. Finally Mr. Caisse pointed out the false dichotomy between law enforcement and community members. Law enforcement officials are a part of the community; as such everyone has to be on board to work together as an entire community in order to effect change.

“The whole concept, as an educator, of community policing is one I really can’t identify with. Because all policing is community policing. So if we’re talking about the concept of community policing it just says we’re doing something wrong. If we’re not doing community policing then what are we doing?” -Gary Berte, Panel I

While many of the panelists’ efforts and initiative, ranging from the [Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative](#) to [C3 policing](#) were applauded, there were concerns that the panel did not adequately address the power imbalance often present between law enforcement officials and community members, particularly in communities of color. This imbalance is constantly at play and can hinder the ability to humanize, empathize, and work collaboratively.

Panel II: What Is And Isn’t Working - Community Perspectives

Panelists

David Rudder - Springfield College

Nelson Roman - Nueva Esperanza and Holyoke City Council

Jynai McDonald - Springfield Police-Community Relations Committee

Yolanda Cancel - Springfield Police-Community Relations Committee

Moderator

Kent Alexander - Anti-Racism Consultant

Summary

As the title of panel suggests, the four panelists discussed what is and isn’t working with regard to law enforcement and their communities. Panelists were familiar with—and in many cases directly involved with—the initiatives discussed in Panel I. While each panelist expressed appreciation for some aspects of those initiatives, they mainly focused on their remaining concerns.

A central concern expressed by a number of the panelists is the separation of police from communities. Mr. Roman explained how the majority of police officers who work in Holyoke don't live in Holyoke. Ms. Cancel shared her experience of observing the difference in treatment of community members by officers from within a community as compared to officers from outside the community. As a former cop and now community member, she sees that when an officer comes from within the community he or she is more likely to treat the community with more respect.

“It gives us a chance to do something else very unique: it gives us a chance to reach young people. We want to focus on recruitment for the Springfield Police Department. And how do we recruit more participants of color? We can't do that if there's already the stigma of us versus them. We can't do that if our first interaction as a young person is [a negative experience with] an officer in uniform. ... If I'm having a bad day or going through a rough patch because stuff is going on at home, the difference between me being sent to a guidance counselor or me being arrested is going to change that as a career path.” - Jynai McDonald, Panel II (speaking about the work of the Springfield Community-Police Relations Committee).

Mr. Roman and Ms. McDonald specifically focused on the relationship between law-enforcement officials and youth in their communities. Ms. McDonald, who works on the C3 Policing committee, expressed the need for youth—specifically youth of color—to have a better impression of the police so that they feel inspired to work in law enforcement. She wants more young people of color to be recruited and ultimately serve as police officers for their communities. This is in stark contrast to the current reality. In some communities there are school resource officers in schools feeding the school-

to-prison pipeline and hurting the relationship between youth of color and law enforcement. Mr. Roman believes in the power of Restorative Justice and has helped create a Restorative Justice program at Holyoke High School to facilitate diversion from retributive disciplinary measures.

Dr. Rudder and other panelists observed that across the board, standards are too low. Ms. Cancel was surprised how easy it is for an 18-year-old coming out of high school to go through basic training and become an officer with a badge and a gun. It takes years to become a doctor or a lawyer, but only a matter of months to become a police officer. Panelists further noted that when officers misuse their authority, once again standards are not high enough and repercussions are not severe enough; if an officer is fired, he or she might simply get assigned elsewhere. Finally, Ms. McDonald expressed disappointment in the low standards of quality in interactions between law enforcement officials and community members.

All four panelists echoed that in order to improve law enforcement - community relationships, there needs to be more transparency, oversight, understanding, and communication. Ms.

McDonald reflected on the importance of clear lines of communication and positive, negative, and constructive feedback systems. Dr. Rudder noted that there is a need for more civilian oversight and external oversight in order to hold law enforcement officials accountable for their actions and accountable to the communities in which they work.

Key Takeaways

While it is clear that there are many gaps that need to be filled and divides that need to be bridged, there is no consensus as to how to do it. Some of the bigger questions that emerged from the panels and Q&A sessions, small group discussions, and plenary group discussion include the following:

1. How can communication between law enforcement officials and the communities they serve, particularly communities of color, be improved? How can people who have had negative interactions with law enforcement effectively share their experiences to increase understanding and empathy?
2. To what extent are the challenges in the relationships between law enforcement and communities of color systemic? Is it simply a matter of rooting out the “bad apples,” as some at the symposium suggested, or are we dealing with an inherently flawed system that must be entirely replaced, as others asserted?
3. Is it possible to imagine a model in which local communities successfully “police” themselves? If so, what would that look like and what would it take to get there?
4. How can more Restorative Justice initiatives or other alternatives to the retributive justice system be incorporated into the current criminal justice system, and more specifically into our communities here in Western MA?
5. How can existing initiatives that are already recognized as having elements of success (such as the C3 program in Springfield or the Safe Neighborhoods Initiative in Holyoke) be further improved, expanded, or replicated elsewhere?

“There were many moments throughout the day when it was evident that white male police officers couldn't conceptualize a world where their jurisprudence/authority to use deadly force might not be such a good thing. The institution of policing so often shapes a genuine impulse to protect and serve into an impulse to dominate, regulate, and control. [...and also...] Eddie Caisse struck me. His passion for the community in Holyoke, and the community's respect for him was clear. Thank you for showing me that good police do in fact exist.” - feedback from a participant

“In our small group, I mentioned to one of the Officers of Color a few recent encounters I've had with police, including one that bordered on bullying behavior. In listening to me recount my story, he was sympathetic. He also urged me, should such an experience happen again, that I should feel free to "talk back" to the officer - explaining myself and pointing out my objection to his/her behavior.

I was surprised at the idea that a police officer who was yelling at me and ordering me around would accept that kind of feedback! Our officer was confused - what was stopping me from expressing myself? What could the consequence be, besides receiving a ticket? I didn't really know how to express the feeling of being intimidated and wanting to minimize conflict...to not provoke...to be compliant...which are all reflections of the power dynamic.

And if I, as a not-very-imposing-looking older white lady experience this kind of fear, how much more so for others who have less apparent privilege? Thinking and reflecting....” - feedback from a participant

Suggested Resource List

One of the suggestions that came out of the plenary session was to create a “required reading list” for law enforcement agencies. [The New Jim Crow](#), by Michelle Alexander, was mentioned several times. [The ACE Study](#) on the lifelong effects of childhood trauma was also mentioned. After the symposium, we asked each of the panelists and moderators to suggest an additional book, article, or online resource pertaining to the topic of the symposium. Their recommendations include the Justice Department’s [Civil Rights Division’s Pattern and Practice Police Reform Work](#) and [Principles for Promoting Police Integrity](#) – examples of promising police practices and policies, as well as the ACLU’s resources on [Reforming Police Practices](#). The Netflix documentary [13th](#) (Ava DuVernay, 2016) is a “must-see” for those interested in learning more about the history and context; and the 5-part podcast [Charm City](#) (New York Times, 2018) is also worth listening to (the Pioneer Valley is not Baltimore, but the series touches on why many people believe it is impossible to reform the current criminal justice system).

Thank you for continuing to engage with this critical issue!