

# Ad-hoc Committee on Police and Community Relations

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*Community Forum Public Comments – January 21, 2016*

Reiko Callner opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and going over the committee’s charter and provided the general session questions.

What has been your experience with the Olympia Police Department?  
How can the Olympia Police Department better serve you?

Kerensa Mabwa gave some guidelines for the conversation.

A comment was made by a community member that it was very uncomfortable to have open dialogue with armed officers in the room. He asked that the 3 officers put their weapons in the car. Lt. Aaron Jelcick responded to this gentleman and noted that he appreciated the comment, but that on duty officers are required to have their weapon on as part of their uniform.

## **General Session:**

### African American male student

Described his experience with a bb gun where someone called the police because they thought it was real. When the police came they asked if anyone had a gun. He revealed the gun and was made to lay on the ground even though he tried to tell them that it was a bb gun. He was scared at the time and didn’t want to “become a statistic”.

Reiko asked some clarifying questions

A neighbor came out of a nearby house and argued with the officers which escalated the situation. The student stated that he understood that officers have to react as if it is a real threat.

Regon Unsoeld asked:

What makes you not want to be a statistic (think that way)?

The student said in 2015 1134 people were shot by police, and 55% of those were African American even though they only make up 2% of the general population.

### African American male student

OPD is better than most police departments. He’s had good experience in any interactions with police here compared to when he lived in Tennessee. There a white girl was hitting his brother. He pushed her away. The Tennessee cops wrestled his brother down – called on his office and searched for drugs for no reason. Here there is more opportunity to talk. In Tennessee they don’t care what people think of the police, especially what African Americans might think. He’s always been treated with respect

here. Would like to see OPD have more forums and dialogues with the community so they can give their input.

White female student

Was involved in a car accident previously. Felt rushed and was in shock. She was the middle vehicle in the accident and accidentally locked her keys in the car when she got out and couldn't get to her license and registration. The officer kept pressuring her to get her documents out of the car even though he knew that she was locked out and was waiting for her brother to bring the spare keys. Officers should be more relaxed/calmer when dealing with situations like this and not rush people through the process.

Clinton asked: Do the African American boys in the room feel threatened by OPD?

African American male adult

Would like to see more people of color on the police force. He'd worked at Washington Middle School. A student there said he'd never seen a black police officer. Concerned this gives young black men no hope that they could be in the department. Important to have that representation. There are three African Americans who work at Olympia High. They talk every day. Would love to see more on the department, and hopes that the qualification standards don't stand in the way of this recruitment. Always uncomfortable when a cop car is behind you and it's a white officer. Not afraid, concerned.

Clinton:

Explained his military experience. Encouraged black males in the room to take opportunities and be the best they can be.

African American male student

We've been fighting "the system" for a long time. An individual is going to have an easier time getting through than a group of people. A lot of it is about where you live, where you were brought up.

Clinton:

Have the courage to speak up. Keep telling people what needs to be heard or it will never change.

African American male student

Described an experience driving past multiple police cars with lights on and was afraid ("froze up").

White female student:

Did you freeze up because of your race or your age?

Answer:

I think both

A friend made eye contact with a police officer at the park one time and the officer drew his weapon and made him lay on the ground.

Clinton:

Does the school have a discussion group for these type of topics where officers can join the discussion?

White female student

Even if they did there's still discomfort because people will judge you (students & teachers) and its hard to feel safe.

African American male student

We need more positive interaction between police department and community. My younger brother was bullied and went to the principal's office to report it. There was no police response and the school didn't do much.

African American male student:

I was also bullied in middle school repeatedly. I reported it and the kid was suspended for 3 days.

Students mom:

My son called the kid who bullied him a "white boy" on the bus and was suspended for 2 weeks. There was very little police response and the punishment was not equal.

Matt Grant – OHS Principle

Knows the school can do more to engage students in dialogue and include OPD in those discussions. Expressed positive experiences with OPD in the past.

Female adult

Put her son in Olympia School District because she wanted him to go to a "good school". Not a year has gone by that her son hasn't been racially harassed and very little discipline has come out of it (half day in school suspension at most). The school needs to put some more discipline in place and not expect parents to decide what the discipline will be. She has been contacted by the school previously and they asked "what she'd like them to do about it".

White female adult – CAB member

There should be more cohesive opportunity for schools and police to have dialogue to resolve bullying.

African American male student

Doesn't personally believe bullying will ever change.

African American male student

Bullying is a learned behavior so it has to be taught from a young age

White female student

If someone is bullying there is an underlying issue going on in their life. School and police need to find a way to address that underlying issue in order to stop that student from bullying. Not just punish each occurrence.

African American male student

I'm a big guy and not a bully, but if I was I wouldn't be afraid of police. They halt the actions at the time, but wouldn't necessarily stop any future bullying.

\*5 Minute Break\*

## Small Group Session

3 groups formed with a different question for each group:

- How can the Olympia Police Department positively engage with people in the community to improve communication and forge a cooperative relationship, especially with community members under-represented in the city?
- The vision of the Olympia Police Department is to provide policing services through trust and partnership:
  - What would that trust and partnership look like to you?
  - How can the Olympia Police Department better meet your goals for public service and community policing?
- What do community members need in order to feel safe when interacting with the police?

### Group 1 – Reiko facilitated

Young black man from California said that you learn that having a positive relationship with cops violates street code.

Kids at CYS programs, like Rosie's Place – kids feel targeted. They expect to experience a lot of crime. They would only go to the cops as a last resort because when they do they're identified as a snitch, or else assume they would not be heard by the cops. They brought in some really great cops at one point, in plain clothes, but some of the kids left anyway. Fostering relationships between cops and these high risk kids is really tricky. When a youth was mistreated by cops they reported it. It was looked at by internal affairs but nothing happened.

Officer Bronson. We only come in at the bad crisis time. I get told I'm a "pig" need to get through that. Have to allow people to vent. Grew up in Southern California raised in a Christian family.

Older white man (who earlier said he was afraid of the guns) said Los Angeles is considered the worst in the country for rogue police, and Chicago, where he came from, the second worst. A young black man agreed that the Illinois cops were very racist. Said it's had, coming from that, getting over fear of cops, and the desire to run when he sees them.

Young black adult said he'd love to see regular get-togethers around sports. Like the police and fire dept playing with a community group. Sports are a good uniting factor – maybe have an annual game, and share food. Flag football or something like that. Have to realize that most African American men don't like or trust cops. Tired of always having to be the person to make the first step, to have to be the one to make overtures and teach white people about race. Young black man said that he had a bad attitude about the police, coming in. Said the police here are excellent, the best he's seen.

Another young black man said it took a year to meet people here. Reunions with family and other members of the black community from elsewhere are really important to him, and at other times he can really feel isolated. The minorities around here are atomized – there's no real ethnic neighborhoods.

White woman said this is a very white community. Doesn't need to be the burden of people of color to lead to change.

## **Group 2 – Kerensa facilitated**

Walking patrols back – safety, youth behaved better when officer present

School resource officers present to hear; things diffused if too far away

2 SRO's now getting into teaching stuff (law ie sexting, education to prevent mistakes)  
Proactive effect on youth

Q – How to gain trust? To new officers  
Important

More SRO's needed

3 officers of color on force; need more

Bring OPD & students together without teachers/parents to educate & debunk myths (youtube, peer discussions, news, etc)

Community oriented policing committee  
Bring it back to share ideas (started around time of columbine shooting)

Culture is parents instill fear in young people about ...

Marshall Middle School MLK Day assembly – students shared difficult stories behind curtain – hearing stories & then classes processed & debriefed in class. Great idea

Invite police to neighborhood meetings and associations

Opps to know your local police, to communicate  
Knowledge/relationship yields trust

Some officers put up a guard – barriers; seem like they are the authority – comfortable tone vs direct tone

Officer Miles (Tumwater PD) modeled this when pulled over for expired tabs – great manner; other police officers inspire fear  
Harsh voice

Officer told woman “accidents happen”  
Felt she was in wrong; vs getting beaten to ground  
Attitude changes how you respond

Difficult work with walking downtown patrol with issues beyond their control (mental illness; revolving prospects with perpetrator ie. Woman allows significant other with restraining order to return home)

Community

1<sup>st</sup> response police officers but not always best 1<sup>st</sup> responder – need counselor or chaplain for support (ie victims or someone in shock – “freeze up”)

Awareness of environment & self awareness of officer are skills to develop; some not trained in this – some pick it up with experience

Tell the true stories about police not the embellished ones – not assuming what you hear is true

Keep officers actively involved in community outside of daily job & feel a part of community & seen that way

Young people are fearful to step into role of police officer as a job

Bridge gap with young men

Police vs firefighter basketball games

Police volunteer days – appeal to softer side, feel safe to come to police for support

Teen boys feel safe connecting with officer not just parents

Have a resource officer who floats the neighborhood on a regular basis (elementary/middle/high schools) dedicated set

Training curriculum for officers; bring it up into this century or decade – amended yearly to respond to shifts

Include community necessity, be involved in community, meet people to be aware of what happens in community

### **Group 3 – Kellie facilitated**

Officers offering eye contact & smile/positive body language

Officers being willing to give a youth time (conversation/calls)

Highlighting the stories of good police officers

Games/events where people can get to know officers better

More officers at meeting makes people feel heard

Dodgeball!

An understanding that not all people of color are trouble makers

Body cameras

Interaction with people outside of enforcing ie pick up basketball games

Building trust/a set time

Giving out candy at Halloween

Sharing projects – eg putting together videos/participating in student projects

More casual contact with police officers

## **Wrap Up**

Reiko called the group back together and thanked them for their participation.

Kerensa thanked everyone for coming and asked the group to form a circle and share one word that they could take away from this experience.

- Love
- Involvement
- Sharing
- Compassion
- Community
- Time
- Hope
- Curious
- Knowledge
- Beginning
- Value
- Dodgeball
- Positive
- Opportunity

\*note: not all words were captured