

Champaign County Racial Justice Task Force (RJTF)
Meeting Minutes
Thursday, May 12, 2016
6:30 pm

I. Call to Order

Sam Byndom called the meeting to order at 6:31pm.

II. Roll Call

Members Present:

M. Ar-Raheem, S. Balgoyen, P. Burnside, S. Byndom, E. Dee, A. Evans, A. Felty, D. Harber, R. Hughes, A. James, E. Patt, C. Randolph, H. Ross, K. Schneider, S. Silver, G. Walter.

Members Absent:

L. Branham, B. Butts, R. Byrd, D. Turner.

III. Approval of Agenda

Sam offered a modification to the agenda to change the name of the presenter from David Sutton to Barbara Kessel. Maryam Ar-Raheem moved to accept the modification. Kevin Schneider seconded the motion. The motion carried.

IV. Approval of Minutes

Kevin moved to approve the minutes. Artice James seconded the motion. The motion carried.

V. Public Participation

There were no public participation requests.

VI. Task Force Member Updates

Sam noted previous resignations: Kim Bryan, Francena Turner, and Walter Feinberg. Ellen Dee and Rosita Byrd (previous alternates) have replaced the members who have resigned.

Community Events

Artice updated the group. Dates being proposed for June are the 9th or 23rd but only for one event. A second event would be June 11th or June 25th. He is waiting to get confirmation for the space. The time for Thursday's meeting would be around 6-8pm and the time for the Saturday event would be around 11am to 1pm. Henry noted that the space he proposed is available for May 9th and May 23rd but not for the Saturdays.

Esther Patt suggested that 6pm may be too early of a start for individuals with children who need to provide dinner. A discussion ensued regarding whether individuals could drop in during the meeting at-will rather than being present the whole time. 7-9pm was presented as an option. Sara Balgoyen noted that snacks are currently a part of the plan.

1109 N. Fourth St., Champaign is the address of The Love Corner. Artice noted that he preferred a Saturday meeting, and Esther agreed. Maryam agreed with the idea of a starting time for 7pm. Henry Ross stated that they may have some Saturdays available in July.

Sara presented updates from the volunteers working on community forums as well. She stated that the goals would be to gain support for the work the task force will be doing and receive input and recommendations for that work. The proposed format would include an introduction from a task force member and/or a representative from another organization along with an overview of the task force. It may be possible to summarize data that has been presented to the task force. Next, the discussion would be split into small groups of 8-10 for talking circles. Sara explained the context of talking circles. One person could be a facilitator to begin the discussion with some simple questions. There would need to be a way to take notes. Possible questions are: what is racial justice, to you?; describe any personal experiences you have had related to racial injustices in Champaign County; how can we make tangible changes that are the most vital? Finally, all small groups could provide a summary of what they talked about to the larger group.

Sam asked about the facilitators of each group and how they would be designated. Sara responded that task force members would be good options for a start. Carolyn Randolph noted that as facilitators, we have to break the barrier between “us” and “them”. She also stated that the structure should be introduced to the community before the event occurs. Finally, she suggested introducing an original question and allowing the group to reflect on it to begin. Esther noted that we may want to specifically state “racial justice in the criminal justice system.” She also suggested making it clear that the purpose of the event is to hear from the community.

Amy Felty noted that the community forums need to be listed as Open Meetings.

Henry noted that he does not want the meetings to be police-bashing meetings and he is concerned about that. Sara agreed and stated she was nervous about trying to narrow the theme to criminal justice because of that. Esther responded that we should not try to structure the meeting specifically to topics or issues. She proposed using a few words to explain the topic of racial justice in the criminal justice system. Pam was also concerned about potential police bashing and would like to find a way to remind people that the police are only the initial contacts with the criminal justice system; she noted that targeted questions or a list of specific words should be used. Kevin agreed with Henry’s concern but noted that this is not the only meeting we will be doing and that other meetings may have specific shareholders. Amy noted that the language from the resolution may be appropriate for guidance. Maryam noted that most people’s entrance into the criminal justice system is through the police which leads to disparities in the system as a whole; she suggested it may be our task to assist in identifying how police interactions leads into that. She would follow up a statement regarding police by asking the individual “and then what happened next”. Alex noted that the phrasing “police bashing” is dangerous because it is biased and discredits individuals; he recommends that we as a group or as individuals consider this. Henry explained that recidivism is a big issue in the criminal justice system and that we should focus on issues that lead to recidivism. He noted that he recognizes that police are a big part of the system but also that schools and employment are important. Sara asked Alex if he would be willing to help think about this as researchers. Alex affirmed. The

volunteers noted that they will follow up on a Saturday meeting. Gerry Walter stated that he hopes we have more than one meeting.

Urbana City Council Fine Reduction Discussion

Ryan Hughes presented context on the issue. Esther noted specific clarifications about the fine and what discretion is up to the police officer. She noted that the committee discussed reducing the fine for paraphernalia. She highlighted an article in the paper about the number of tickets written per year and explained the connection of other items related to prosecution and conviction for controlled substances. She noted that we should think in terms of how much we limit our recommendations to simply things that the local governments can do; she believes the key problems are beyond the decision making power of the board or city councils.

Alex asked about the topic and whether Ryan was proposing a formal statement of solidarity with the Council. Ryan expanded. Alex asked the task force if they thought the War on Drugs was real and something we need to acknowledge. Kevin agreed and stated it is objective. Maryam did not feel that we need to acknowledge these items in the past tense; she thinks it would actually enhance our credibility and capacity by stating our support. Gerry agreed and thinks we should commend the city council for looking at data and taking action on something they could do. Sara agrees that we should act now and share it with the County Board. Gerry concurred. Artice was skeptical about the task force taking a political position but he agrees that a clear disparity was shown and an action was taken. Brenda Butts agreed that how it is worded is important. David Harber liked the idea that the City Council listened to recommendations and acted on it. He noted that this is a systemic racism issue and he liked the recognition that outcomes will be changed if this occurs. Esther stated that there are also other recommendations being acted on by the City Council. Pam stated hesitation about this action because the task force is proposing going against the state which has a statute for a larger fine. Ryan responded by explaining the similar issues the City Council had and felt that it is important to acknowledge the City Council for taking an action on something they could change. Maryam agreed with Ryan and thought it was appropriate to address a disparity based on the findings of the data. Sara asked if the task force could note in the statement that it is supportive of Urbana continuing to follow up with the data. Maryam noted that she would like to hold off. Maryam moved to have Ryan and/or other individuals to draft a statement of support for reducing racial disparities by using data. Esther moved to suspend the rules for public participation. Sara seconded. Public participation was offered. The motion carried by vocal vote. James Kilgore (of the public) stated he thinks it is an important action to support the City Council and he said that the discussion has been very productive. Kevin seconded the motion by Maryam to have someone draft a statement of support. The motion carried by vocal vote.

Presentations

David Sutton – David was not present.

Court Watch – Barbara Kessel

Barbara presented to the group why she was there. She is a volunteer at the jail and a court-watcher. She hosts a program at the jail with a dozen men. Court-watch responds to people who ask for volunteers to sit in at court. She walked the task force through a series of documents and articles that she shared with the group, highlighting the impacts of incarceration, the need for bail, the pre-trial system, racial makeups of people booked in Champaign County jail, and a few personal stories of individuals in the jail.

Esther commented that there were a few individuals who she felt were safe for the community. She asked about the difference of being in jail and being booked in jail. Pam replied that when you are taken to the jail, you are booked. Kevin also defined what booking means. Esther asked Barbara about the statistics about arrests. Kevin, Pam, and Barbara discussed the booking and sentencing process, including which parties are involved in the process. David asked about the statutory requirements and whether they were local or state. Kevin explained they were state. Amy asked how individuals might not be in court when they are charged. Barbara explained that she was talking about pre-trial visits to court. A discussion regarding continuances occurred. Barbara also discussed a movement to remove bail. Kevin noted a “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver” episode that may be of help in understanding these issues.

VII. Task Force Member Comments

There were no task force member comments.

VIII. Adjournment

Kevin moved to adjourn. Artice seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 8:42.