

Public Input at Community Forums Held in June 2016

The Racial Justice Task Force conducted two community meetings at the end of June, 2016 which were listening sessions to obtain feedback from members of the public about their concerns regarding racial disparity in the criminal justice system. Financial support and publicity for these sessions was provided by the Champaign County chapters of the National Council of African American Men (NCAAM), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

A combined total of 75 people attended the sessions which were held at the Church of the Living God in Champaign and the Independent Media Center in Urbana. Following are the comments and suggestions made by those in attendance.

Personal Experiences

Lola said she grew up in this community and children today do not have the same opportunities that African American children had in the 1960's for activities – no youth center, no skating rink, etc. She also said schools have changed a lot; parents can't observe classes as easily as they used to and if a parent comes to the school, s/he is told it is best to email teachers and make appointments. She also said the schools need more African American principals, administrators and teachers.

Deloris said that 20 years ago, local schools started copying the State's Attorney on all discipline notes sent home to parents about their children's behavior, thus giving children a "record" that gets used against them if they are arrested as a teenager or young adult. She said then-State's Attorney Tom Difanis told school officials he wanted to prosecute students for misbehaving and invited administrators to use his office more for that purpose.

Several members talked about the recent community activism about police in schools and think the task force should investigate how schools are helping build the criminal records of children.

A couple also spoke about schools and the man said he'd like to volunteer at the school his child attends but because he has a conviction record they have no use for him. He thinks ex-cons could educate children a lot about how to avoid involvement in the criminal justice system when they get older.

Kristina, who is Caucasian and married to a man of color said as soon as she moved here 3 years ago, she was struck by the extent of segregation and discriminatory treatment. She told 2 stories: 1) a police officer knocked on her door one night investigating a neighbor's complaint that "a Black man was in the backyard." 2) She and her husband went to DMV two different days the same week and she had no trouble getting an IL license but her husband was required to provide a lot more paperwork even though their situations were identical (but their race is not).

One woman told about being the victim of a hate crime. She lives near Carroll and Perkins and is African American. Soon after moving into her house, a white neighbor started using his truck to harass the family, driving around the house and up on the grass. He was convicted of the hate crime and sentenced but released after only 5 days and he never lost his driver's license.

One person provided copies of articles he has written recounting incidents in which African Americans were treated more harshly than white people who had committed comparable or more serious crimes. Copies of these articles can be provided to RJTF members.

Dave, as a school teacher and administrator in Buckley-Loda, saw many times where rules were enforced in different ways across races. Unit #4 (Champaign) is currently under federal investigation for racial equity. With police officers in schools, there are more arrests/problems for young black men.

One black female high school student in Buckley-Loda had taken no math when she graduated and was applying to colleges. When asked about it, the guidance counselor said, "She won't go to college," and so the counselor didn't have her take math. The student eventually did attend college, took math, and graduated; she is doing fine now.

Brian, a morning "voice" on WILL radio, recalled serving on two all-white juries, one for a Champaign County case of simple battery and one involving a federal drug case. The defendants were black and were found guilty in pretty straightforward cases each time. (The drug case defendant wanted to have a jury trial so he could prove he wasn't a "snitch." Then he could serve his time and get out without later harm.) The witnesses in the battery case were black, too.

We need to diversify the jury pool and juries for both black and white defendants. If voter registration and driver's license roles are used, that automatically eliminates many black jurors. The system needs to be examined and changed.

Amy, a retired schoolteacher and administrator, noted that racism is still active in small towns in the county. Two black women recently drove in Mahomet and encountered white youth yelling the "n" word and insults at them. One of the women said she does not go to Tolono because she feels uncomfortable there as a black person.

Nikoli, the relatively new pastor at the Lutheran Church in Mahomet, said the church has white membership and people are defensive about the perception that they are prejudiced when the topic comes up in presentations about racism. He wonders how to best approach the subject of racial injustice.

Jan, who worked as a teacher in ELS and GED programs in adult education at Parkland, shared that a black administrator at UIUC, a man who has been in the community for many years, is still stopped by the police for no reason. She also noticed that when Parkland's security people were called to classes to talk with disruptive students, the security people treated the black

students differently than the white students. Black students were pushed into walls and made to “sprawl” out.

Dave’s daughter-in-law, who is Asian, says that she is not assimilated into the community the same way that whites are. We need to pay attention to all instances where prejudice and biases are in play.

Brian explained that he and his wife chose to settle in Savoy where there was more diversity than in Sidney. She teaches in Unit #4 schools. They moved from Sidney.

Amy talked about black men, especially young men between 16 and 25, who have lost their licenses and cannot drive legally. They must walk, bicycle, catch the bus, call a taxi, or depend upon friends or family to get to work, do errands, and move around town. White men the same age don’t lose their licenses at the same rate or for as long a duration, it seems. [something to gather data on] Lose of a license has a profound impact upon where a person can be employed: getting to work on time is much more of a problem and filling out applications can include the question “do you have a car to use?” Getting around on a bicycle in cold weather, rain, snow, or heat is difficult. Riding a bicycle when a person has a slight cold (or worse) can be a problem. The disparities of race increase without access to a valid license. [If white men drive without a license, their chances of being stopped for anything is lower, and they are less likely to be “caught” anyway.]

Nikoli noted that, just as with the issues of Chief Illini, telling other people how they feel about something doesn’t work. If people feel unsafe – in this case, black people – then they do. He spoke about the practice of Christian values versus just calling oneself “Christian” and still being and acting prejudiced.

Jan said that she has been called to interview youth for Parkland’s GED educational program in the county jail. She said that youth have their study/learning access “pulled” for “disciplinary” reasons, and black students may lose access the soonest for what could be minor things like “mouthing off” to someone. She suggests making sure that education is not a “perk”! Instead, education should be available to all jailed people. Losing that opportunity to learn is not a privilege, but a necessity.

Issues at parent teacher conferences in school

Juvenile detention did not have any programming to help kids

Being pulled over because mistaken for a black male

Being pulled over because a black male

Being forced to take a plea bargain because public defender is overworked

Poor record keeping through long time in system led to police losing record of driver's license

Most prisons are in small towns that depend on the prison for jobs for white population; this creates incentive for keeping it full

Unlawful search of a home with only children present

Trying to get as much money out of the poor as possible through fines/fees

Significant fines which had piled up during time in federal prison - had to be paid back and this made it difficult to re-enter society (ex. \$250 fee for taking DNA)

Upon re-entry to Champaign, threatened by CPD that if found in the city, he would be arrested

Recommendations for action made by community forum participants

End the "school to prison pipeline;" several people expressed concern about schools going to the police too much about small discipline issues that 30 years ago never involved police. Also, advocate for more opportunity for parents to be involved, informally in their children's education (being able to drop in a monitor a class, for example), and promote the schools hiring more non-white principals, administrators and teachers

Hire more public defenders to reduce their workload so they don't feel the need to pressure so many of their clients to just accept plea bargains.

Release on their own recognizance anyone who cannot afford bail when the bail amount is relatively small (like \$1,000 - \$5,000 bond which is \$100 to \$500 bail).

Find an alternative to using the jail as a detox center to reduce risk of death in jail.

Get street lights in Dobbins Downs, Garden Hills and other areas of Urbana and Champaign that currently have no street lights.

Get Champaign and U of I to conduct a study of racial disparities in traffic stops similar to the study conducted by Urbana.

Study jury selection and see if changes to the system have made juries more racially diverse.

Educate County Board members about racial justice issues and promote awareness of racial disparities.

Educate police about community perceptions of policing; every time police-community relations is discussed, the police always offer ways for the public to better understand the

police but they do not embrace suggestions that they better understand people in the communities.

Educate community members about their rights – not just about how to speak to police when stopped.

Incorporate people with conviction records in our study to collect their experiences.

The Racial Justice Task Force should continue as an action group after its designated study time is up because many policy changes require action by other elected or appointed bodies than the County Board and it is not realistic to expect the County Board will advocate to school boards, city councils, etc. for change.

Kids don't have opportunities, need increased opportunities (opportunities for?).

Toby of "Educational Justice Project" would like to go to schools to talk to kids about his own history to help them avoid making the same mistakes, but has not been allowed to because of that history.

A State's Attorney sent out a letter to school districts saying he wanted to be informed about expelled students. Is not an official policy but is being carried out, causing students to accumulate files and history before having direct contact with the criminal justice system.

Public Defender is overworked and has little to no time to give adequate representation. Decrease PD work load.

Improve community-police relations.

Increase parental involvement in schools. Goal should be: parents should increase involvement, police should decrease involvement.. Parents should attend school board meetings and complain.

Encourage University and Champaign police departments to do traffic stop studies similar to that done recently by Urbana.

Educate citizens about their rights during police interactions.. Replace fear and uncertainty with knowledge.

Institute "Community Policing."

Make changes to bail system. Either lower bail for those unable to pay or entirely eliminate bail.

Encourage police to give warnings, rather than make arrests.

Increase the number of public defenders, and increase the pay of public defenders.

Adopt the recommendations of the Ferguson Consent Decree in Champaign County.

Adopt the Justice Department recommendations that stemmed from the Laquan McDonald shooting in Chicago.

Provide greater access to behavioral health assistance.

Provide greater access to health care.

Provide greater assistance to those with substance abuse problems.

Adopt a restorative justice model.

Abandon the war on drugs.

Increase access to educational opportunities.

Increase access to employment opportunities.

Increase minority representation in jury pools.

Seek ways to permit drivers to keep their licenses.

Offer diversity training to community groups, including but not limited to those in the criminal justice system.

Seek changes to the way crimes are reported so that better data can be collected, especially regarding the races of all concerned.

Establish youth groups to promote discussions of race among the young.

Encourage more conversations about race in both schools and churches.

Adopt pretrial services.

Adopt a grading card for judges and attorneys.

Offer the community more information regarding racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

Create more diverse groups to engage in broader discussions of race in the criminal justice system, including those in authority.

Seek to establish better relations between the police and the communities they serve.

Seek to change negative stereotypes regarding races.

Have the police departments adopt methods for deescalating highly emotional situations.

Seek to have authoritative bodies (County Board, City of Champaign, City of Urbana, etc.) publicly offer support for all initiatives to reduce racial injustice.

Adopt both immediate and long term solutions.

Offer training on how to effectively use video recordings from cell phones to document arrests.

Adopt the "Don't Shoot" program, throughout the county.

Increase re-entry support.

Establish an independent Civilian Review Board.

Increase minority representation throughout the criminal justice system.

Promote fewer police traffic stops.

Promote the use of police foot patrols.

Examine and limit to the extent possible the use of financial pretrial-release conditions, such as cash bail

Utilize warnings more often instead of drawing people into the criminal-justice system

Make the generation of revenue, such as through the issuance of traffic tickets, neither a priority or purpose of law enforcement

Increase the number of public defenders

Increase the salaries of public defenders, paying them the same amount as prosecutors

Provide more investigators to assist public defenders

Examine the consent decree that Ferguson, Missouri entered into with the Department of Justice and other consent decrees for ideas, such as the institution of community policing

Only employ law-enforcement officials who live within the community (not, for example, in nearby small towns)

“Change the narrative”; focus on practices that adversely impact the marginalized, not just African Americans

Utilize behavioral-health evaluations to keep people out of jail and, more generally, out of the criminal-justice system

Prosecute police officers who lie in police reports or in court

Integrate restorative practices throughout all stages of the criminal-justice process

Abandon the “war on drugs,” both at the local level and state level

Focus on the municipal courts as well as the circuit court

Integrate “Teaching Tolerance” into schools’ curriculums

Develop partnerships between faith-based organizations, neighborhoods, and government agencies to provide comprehensive reentry support to all people (not just a few) who are reentering the community from prison or jail; make the securing of shelter and a job top priorities, particularly during the three-to-six-month period following release

Specifically link people being released from jail or prison with employers

Establish Civilian Review Boards in each community and ensure that they have subpoena power

Take steps so that businesses in Champaign County share the responsibility for finding and providing jobs to people returning to the community from prison or jail

Examine the Allegheny County Reentry Program for ideas about how to improve the handling of reentry in our own county

Identify how to fund any recommendations; help in this funding

Establish a Restorative Center, one of whose purposes would be to prevent and address disputes and harmful conduct that now elicit a criminal-justice response

Ongoing education of the people of Champaign County (about, for example, the cost & adverse impact of pretrial detention, etc.)

Adopt measurable goals and monitor the progress in realizing each goal

Include the targeted population in decision-making processes

Concentrate on recommendations, such as the institution of Civilian Review Boards, that can be implemented without a lot of funds

Take the subject of expanding the jail off the table

Reduce or eliminate criminal-justice-related practices that are expensive but not very effective; for example, diminish the number of traffic stops (squad cars are expensive) and instead “walk the beat”

Make it the norm in the county to arrest as few people as possible and incarcerate as few people as possible in the jail

Ask our state legislators to work to abandon the war on drugs at the state level; enlist the public-health system in addressing problems caused by both legal and illegal drugs

Ensure that the recommendations spotlight what the county itself can do to help abate racial disparity in the criminal-justice system

Before issuing a report containing the RJTF’s recommendations, elicit agreements from individuals, entities, and organizations to take certain steps outlined in the recommendations; highlight those agreements contemporaneously with the report’s issuance

Never rescind education – access to learning – for jailed individuals for poor behavior. (Violent behavior towards a teacher/tutor is a different issue.)

In small county towns – not just in C-U – have discussion about racial issues: presentations, discussion, trainings, etc. Not just in the schools, but in the communities, the churches, and other venues.

Expand jury pools and the jury selection process to have [meaningful] minority representation on juries. Look at the current selection process from beginning to end to diverse effective changes. If driver’s license lists and voter registration rolls do not include a fair number/proportion of black citizens, what else would be used to better ends?

Examine the judge’s instruction to juries for implicit biases, especially once juries are diversified. People from minority groups should not feel intimidated by majority group jurors during deliberations and decision-making processes.

Opportunities for gainful employment and for advancement are affected by being in jail. A person shouldn’t be locked up without real cause, as missing work schedules often means losing jobs.

Everyone needs access to gainful employment and advancement. [Look into the disparities that exist in C-U based on race and other prejudices.]

Diversity training in all aspects of community life – education, businesses, daily interactions, social settings, faith meetings government office and offices – is appropriate. We need to concentrate all efforts to root out both explicit and implicit biases to create better, safer, more united communities.

Health care, including mental health care, costs should be affordable to everyone. People with disabilities should have access to health care, too.

Mental health issues that police officers face in doing their job need to be addressed differently than with arrests or visits to the ERs. There is a need for long-term mental health care that white people more often are directed to than black people are directed to. It would be good to research this: Are black people more often taken to jail for mental health issues?

In jails, there is not a good sense of scheduling. Prisoners are pulled out for hearings without notice. Teachers/tutors are sent to meet with jailed persons at specific times, but the sessions can be called off without notice at any time for court appearances. Better scheduling can give prisoners a better sense of the “flow” of life when people know what is happening and when it will happen.

The practice of taking a driver’s license away should be carefully examined. It should only be removed in necessary instances that have to do with driving safety. People should be able to get their licenses back when they have rectified the unsafe circumstances.

Added later: Have every person released from jail or prison come out with an I.D., ready for use in looking for housing, employment, a driver’s license, and whatever else is needed.

Added later: Have counseling already set up for all released prisoners – don’t make *anyone* have to seek out a case worker with access to mental health counseling, medical issues, educational programs, employment searches, or housing. Instead, have that ready to go and assigned at release. If possible, the caseworker should meet with the soon-to-be-released individual before release. All part of a program to connect ex-prisoners with the community and with self-sufficiency.] The only way “out” of this would be if an individual to be released actually had employment, housing, and counseling already set up and confirmed. Opt out, but automatically have an opt in system functioning.

People should make efforts to talk and meet one another more. Have meaningful conversations about race and race prejudice.

Attend a Racial Taboo film showing and get involved in the small group meetings afterwards. Groups have been meeting regularly since December 2016.

Radio and TV (and other media) should report on issues of racial disparities locally. WILL radio has interviewed families of victims of violence lately. Uni High and WILL together have created programs about race, equity, and disparities.

People can attend the Champaign County Coalition meetings on the second Wednesdays of each month to hear the reports of the local police and agencies. Get involved in what is happening in the community.

We need groups of youth to come together to discuss race problems and solutions in concrete, common sense ways. Youth perspectives are important, and they can spearhead changes that are long lasting for present and future generations.

Have direct community outreach at the schools to engage youth in the conversations and in the solutions to racism.

Let people know their options if they get in trouble - have a designated person or organization responsible for this

Force authorities to pay back the fines of individuals who were wrongfully imprisoned

Review disparities in charging and sentencing - don't focus only on policing

End cash bail

Reduce number of people incarcerated

Conflict resolution training/education for children

Local diversion programs (such as Garden Hills and Novak Academy)

Diversion programs that aren't focused on punishment

Programs to teach teens how to interact with police

Body cameras are a good idea (also good for bad kids)

Educate officers on how to talk to people

Hold police accountable for poor conflict resolution

Require officers to live in the community they serve

Review the rules about passersby who photograph interactions with police

Restrict hiring of combat veterans

Require police to volunteer in the community (similar to tenure system at U of I)

Work on community connections - "the community knows that police and firemen are racist

Parents should discipline at home

Have the community interview police officer candidates

Community events to establish relationships with police and community - police play ball in the parks

Do away with War on Drugs

Word Count Content Analysis of Comments

Police	33
Policing	4
Community policing	2
School	27
[drivers] License	15
Education	12
Health	10
Behavioral or mental	7
Teacher	9
Bail	8
Public defender	8
Employment	6
Drugs	5
Training	5
Jobs	5
Traffic	5
Housing	3
Pretrial	3
Restorative	3
Fines/fees	3
Judge	2