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BALTIMORE ETHICAL SOCIETY

From Talk To Action

*A Community Conversation
on Systemic Racism*

Discussion and Action Plans

*Report of the Joint BES-OFJ Meeting
May 3, 2015*



On Sunday, May 3, 2015, the Baltimore Ethical Society (BES) and Out For Justice (OFJ) held a community conversation to develop action plans to address the issues of systemic racism in Baltimore. These issues were always present but have been newly brought into focus by the homicide of Mr. Freddie Gray and the protests that followed.

The event was led by Ms. Diamonte Brown, Director of Out for Justice (<http://out4justice.org/>). The event began with opening remarks by Ms. Brown. She recounted her own experience with the criminal justice system, then introduced six topics for discussion. The topics were: Returning Citizens, Youth Opportunity, Ethical Policing and Police Brutality, Overcoming Fear, Community Accountability, and Fair Housing. The discussions were facilitated by BES members Dr. Joseph Adams, Mr. Greg Corbitt, Ms. Laura Griffin, Mr. Thomas Higdon, Ms. Katherine LaClair, and Professor Charles Shafer. About 61 people participated in the event. Participants chose which discussion group to join. Each section below treats one discussion topic and has two parts: discussion and recommendations. The discussion part briefly introduced the topic and provided ideas and suggestions for the group to discuss. The second part summarizes the recommendations of the group.



Ms. Diamonte Brown, Out for Justice

The society is publishing this report in the hope that it will stimulate discussion and lead to the implementation of some of the action plans proposed.

Returning Citizens

Facilitated by Mr. Greg Corbitt

Discussion

Citizens returning from incarceration face many barriers to re-entering society as full participants. Some of these barriers are:

- Unequal access to employment
- Reduced access to affordable housing
- Restriction of family connection while incarcerated, leading to community disconnection after release
- Restriction of voting rights
- Social stigma



Some examples of solutions that business and community organizations have created are:

- Employers who make a point to hire ex-offenders, like CivicWorks or the Dogwood Restaurant (now closed).
- Support “Ban the Box” and other laws that shield nonviolent criminal records from casual examination and “weeding out” during the first steps of the job application process.
- House Bill 980 titled “Election Law - Voting Rights for Ex-Felons” would restore voting rights for convicted felons who are currently on parole/probation. This supports their reintegration into society and affirms their worth as citizens.
- The Hope House program in DC connects inmates to their families.

Ideas for new programs or assistance:

- Eliminate the fee for expungement of criminal records (HB 904)
- Free community college for all citizens.
- Offer college courses in prison and improve prison libraries.
- Improve the Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) Re-entry program.

Come up with some new ideas for how to address these problems. Each person has something unique to offer, whether it be experience, time, monetary, etc.. What can you contribute? What can communities like yours contribute?

Recommendations

On the community/group level, we can;

1. Sign a petition to pass legislation to restore voting rights to ex-felons.
2. Create and circulate a list of businesses that hire ex-felons.
3. Create and circulate a list of Landlords and Real Estate management agencies that do not discriminate against ex-felons.
4. Create an “Angie's List” style website that connects skilled ex-felons to jobs and contracts.
5. Facilitate computer training classes for ex-offenders to help them generate professional resumes.

On the individual level, we can seriously reconsider our own personal preconceptions about how we categorize people who have committed crimes. We should take a good look at our own prejudices in regard to ex-felons.

Youth Opportunity

Facilitated by Ms. Kate LaClair. Mr. Max Romano reported for the group.

Discussion

Black youth in Baltimore are often denied the everyday opportunities that other young people take for granted, including:

- Good schools
- Recreation programs
- Employment and skills development



Some examples of solutions that business and community organizations have created are:

- Johns Hopkins East Baltimore Public Elementary school, offering 50/50 enrollment to local children and children of Hopkins employees.
- Attempt by many community organizations to divert funds from building a new youth prison to funding for schools (which was not adopted by local government).
- Greater Homewood Community Corporation (now Strong City Baltimore) adopted the 29th St. Community Center after the City stopped funding and shut it down. They now fund and staff programs for all ages throughout the year.
- Local businesses providing jobs and training especially to black youth, including Real Food Farm and CUPs Coffee House.
- City Council President Jack Young has called for the City to do more summer hiring.
- Community associations that facilitate literacy and education, such as City Recreation Centers and privately operated community centers, like the 29th Street Community Center
- Start a youth-led Cooperative (Co-op) projects, e.g, retail or restaurant

Come up with some new ideas for how to address these problems. Each person has something unique to offer, whether it be experience, time, monetary, etc.. What can you contribute? What can communities like yours contribute?

Recommendations

To provide solutions that increase youth opportunity, our group agreed that we should ask what youth in underserved communities want and need. The solutions for improving any situation should always come from the leadership of the community affected, and it is the role of outside groups or individuals to empower that vision in their unique way. We talked about two topics: youth empowerment, and youth employment.

Youth empowerment:

We discussed some local youth-led groups that are already engaged in work around youth opportunity. Some examples are Wide Angle Youth Media, Youth Empowered Society, the Baltimore Algebra Project, the Peace Ambassadors of the Inner Harbor Project, and Peace by Piece. Some schools also have youth empowerment initiatives, including Baltimore Design School.

As allies to underserved youth, our action plan is:

1. Contact one or a few youth-led initiatives and ask how we can support their work. It is also important to be up-front about our capabilities and limitations based on the talents and abilities of the individuals on the final action team (i.e., fundraising? media promotion? skills mentorship?)
2. Use the national network of Ethical Societies to ask for further assistance, if appropriate (i.e. they could donate to a fundraising campaign).

Youth employment:

Local businesses also have a role to play in increasing employment opportunities for youth, especially those from underserved communities, and some Baltimore businesses like CUPs coffeehouse and Civic Works have already made this commitment. Baltimore City government also created the Hire One Youth initiative, and a list of participating businesses is published at oedworks.com/resources.

We discussed a plan to promote the businesses that hire underserved youth throughout Baltimore. Some of the members of our planning team are artists, and had the idea to contact Wide Angle Youth media and asking if they would like to be involved in creating promotional videos for social media and/or local tv encouraging people to shop at businesses that employ youth. This would combine youth empowerment with employment, and encourage more businesses to start or continue to hire youth. Hopefully it would generate more business for those that are helping to reduce the employment shortage among young people in Baltimore.

Ethical Policing and Police Brutality

Facilitated by Professor Charles Shafer

Discussion

Police brutality and violence toward citizens is commonplace, particularly in black communities. The nationally common occurrence of this problem indicates it is a systemic one, rather than the actions of a few “bad people” in uniform. Some of the problems are:



- policies that define the job of police and how they operate. Examples include arresting drug offenders, arresting people in “high-crime areas,” using arrest as the primary means of addressing problems
- lack of strong, well-funded departments to deal with non-violent issues, like drug use, drug sale, mental illness, prostitution, etc.
- lack of positive communication between police and communities, fueled by mistrust

Some examples of solutions that business and community organizations have created are:

- Programs to increase positive interaction between police and citizens like community policing and the Police Athletic League (PAL). Diamonte heard positive reports of PAL centers and the programs they offered.
- Citizens on Patrol programs, where community members patrol the community with officers to increase community cohesion, and provide a social barrier to unlawful behavior
- Special Benefits Districts (e.g., Midtown or Charles Village) offer an additional police presence that is ongoing. For some neighborhoods, residents interact with the police come only when there’s a problem and rarely see police providing a safety presence. If more neighborhoods had Benefits Districts, it might create a demand signal for better city services.

Come up with some new ideas for how to address these problems. Each person has something unique to offer, whether it be experience, time, monetary, etc.. What can you contribute? What can communities like yours contribute?

Recommendations

The overarching theme of our discussion was that the police should be helped to see themselves as “peace officers” as opposed to law enforcement officers.

1. Police Athletic League

- a. It seems that these programs have been cut back or eliminated.
 - b. However, they provide an opportunity for police and youth to see each other as human beings instead of enemies.
2. Incentives for ethical policing
- a. Aggressive tactics are incentivized
 - i. Quotas
 - ii. Emphasis on making arrests
 - iii. No penalty for bad arrests.
 - 1. Thus street encounters are escalated to the point where an arrest can be made for “failure to obey a lawful order” and arguing can be labeled “resisting arrest.”
 - b. There should be a way to reward or recognize officers who
 - i. make no arrests or no bad arrests
 - ii. Successfully deescalate situations
3. Visits to Community groups to exchange concerns and views
4. Training that includes representatives of community groups so trainees
- a. understand the concerns of those groups
 - b. see them as human beings
 - c. Feel that the police force sees itself as having a priority of helping citizens.
5. Citizens on Patrol
- a. Not private groups on patrol themselves
 - b. An opportunity for human to human contact
 - c. An opportunity for each participant to understand the perspective of the other.
6. Special Benefits Districts
- a. We felt this is counter-productive and serves only to increase the disparity between neighborhoods.

Community Accountability

Facilitated by Ms. Laura Griffin. Ms. Miriam Cummons reported for the group.

Discussion

Citizens must take responsibility for their community. Citizens should hold each other accountable for taking care of their community.

Some examples of solutions that business and community organizations have created are:

- Encourage Neighborhood Watch programs with block captains, community captains
- Promote the anonymous reporting program called Baltimore Crime Watch Number: <http://crime.baltimorecity.gov/ReportCrime/CrimeWatchNumberApplication.aspx>
- Urban Farming, garden instead of throwing trash in spaces, not asking someone to bring healthy food into their neighborhood but creating food
- Time Banking



Come up with some new ideas for how to address these problems. Each person has something unique to offer, whether it be experience, time, monetary, etc.. What can you contribute? What can communities like yours contribute?

Recommendations

1. Encourage active participation of parents in their kids' education by creating a "Parent of a Scholar Contract" with 5 action items and steps towards being involved in their kids' education.
2. Working with local Baltimore organizations/associations
 - (a) Call to action from neighborhood leaders to crowd-source resources and knowledge (vs. competing over resources)
 - (b) Encourage different local neighborhood organizations/associations to start dialogue about race, criminal justice system and issues impacting people of color in Baltimore
3. Encourage local jobs/organizations (especially the ones we work at) to support the professional development for Baltimore youth who may otherwise not have similar opportunities. For example, High school internship programs, Youth Works.
4. Organize dialogues about race. One idea was host "Race Dialogues". This event would be similar to Vagina Monologues, in that you would hear short monologues from a range of different personal perspectives and backgrounds on the issue.

Overcoming Fear

Facilitator: Dr. Joe Adams

Discussion

Overcome fear and prejudice across different groups and neighborhoods.

Some examples of solutions that business and community organizations have created or could pursue:

- Programs that promote interaction between police and citizens, like the Police Athletic League (PAL): <http://www.baltimorepolice.org/our-services/youth-programs>
- Organize joint community dinners between different neighborhood associations from different parts of the city
- Establish community associations or homeowners associations throughout the city
- Integrate teaching of African culture and philosophy throughout the curriculum for all students



Come up with some new ideas for how to address these problems. Each person has something unique to offer, whether it be experience, time, monetary, etc.. What can you contribute? What can communities like yours contribute?

Recommendations

Get people together from different backgrounds, especially people of color / returning citizens, with white groups from churches, (or black churches), neighborhood associations, individuals, maybe schools. And maybe getting publicity for it in the media, especially alternative media. And seeing if corporations would contribute money. But mostly getting people together, especially returning citizens (who are stigmatized). Possibly through Out For Justice, of course, which is an organization for returning citizens.

Housing

Facilitated by Mr. Thomas Higdon

Discussion

Ta-Nehisi Coates in his paper “The Case for Reparations” argues that housing discrimination is a major factor in the inability of African American families to transfer wealth from one generation to the next.



Some ideas for solutions:

- Provide guarantees for housing loans, or some other form of subsidy, through the City, or a City-mandated program for lenders. Subsidize private mortgage insurance, perhaps by creating an assigned risk pool, with regulated premiums.
- Increase the number of affordable housing units that developers must build.

Recommendations

1. Propose legislations to restrict the use of criminal records in the mortgage and rental application process. Seek financial support for legal aid agencies to enforce these restrictions and educate the public on their rights.
2. Launch an education campaign on the historic problem of redlining, how it impacted the present value of homes in predominantly black communities, and the need for compensation.
3. Create a nonprofit to promote cooperative housing in Baltimore with specific emphasis on underserved communities including ex-offenders.
4. Explore ways to promote credit unions in our communities and encourage these lenders to serve ex-offenders. These may include tax incentives, subsidies, or changes to regulations.
5. Work with existing groups (e.g. Jobs Opportunities Task Force) to expand their financial literacy and homebuyer education programs to include targeted outreach into the ex-offender community.
6. Promote urban homesteading by reducing the tax assessment on improved residential property for a period of X years.

Contact information

To learn more about this work and/or to volunteer, please contact

Ms. Diamonte Brown
Executive Director/Organizer
Out For Justice, Inc.
3846 B Falls Rd.
Baltimore, MD 21211
Cell: (443) 422-8884
dbrown@out4justice.org

<http://www.out4justice.org/>

Mr. Thomas Higdon, Chair
Ethical Action Committee
Baltimore Ethical Society
306 W. Franklin St., Suite 102
Baltimore, MD 21201
Cell: (443) 362-2764
higdon.thomas@gmail.com
ask@bmorethical.org
<http://bmorethical.org/>