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BALTIMORE ETHICAL SOCIETY

From Talk To Action

*A Community Conversation
on Systemic Racism*

PART II

Discussion and Action Plans

Report of the Joint BES-OFJ Meeting

August 30, 2015



Introduction

On Sunday, August 30, 2015, the Baltimore Ethical Society (BES) and Out For Justice (OFJ) held a second community conversation in a continuing effort to develop action plans to address 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. This report summarizes the conversation and the recommendations that followed.



Background

The first BES/OFJ conversation took place on May 3rd and concluded with a list of 23 potential action items, which were published in a report, *From Talk to Action: A Community Conversation on Systemic Racism*. On July 10th, an Implementation Team consisting of representatives of BES and OFJ met and narrowed the list to six potential actions. Finally, on August 26th, the members of OFJ met and discussed the remaining options and selected one action item to be the focus of our work moving forward. Specifically, we will work to create program that brings police and ex-offenders together in structured interactions.

Summary

The August 30th conversation began with a brief update of the process by Mr. Thomas Higdon, Chair of the BES Ethical Action Committee, and Ms. Diamonte Brown, Executive Director of OFJ. Participants then divided into two groups. Group A was asked what preconceived ideas do they have about law enforcement officers, how those ideas might affect dialogue between law enforcement and returning citizens, and what actions we might take to improve communication. Group B looked at the same questions, but from the perspective of law enforcement.

Group A Report - Our Perception of Law Enforcement

1. How do we see the law enforcement officers?

- They are quota driven.
- They think they are “above the law”.
- They are looking for any reason to act as extremely as they wish – including with violence.
- They are militaristic and authoritarian. Their military backgrounds influence their reactions.
- They do not allow backtalk: civilians must show them respect but the police do not have to respect anybody.
- They like to provoke the people they stop.
- They are racist and presume that people of color are guilty, already, of something.
- They put more effort into solving some crimes than others – race and class are big factors.
- They have an “us vs. them” mentality.



How can we improve dialogue between returning citizens and law enforcement officers?

- Require police to spend more time on the streets meeting people on a daily basis.
- Promote a program of community “walk alongs” that would pair a police officer with a returning citizen who would walk them through their neighborhood.
- Promote more one on one interactions with more officers – not the same ones every time, especially not just the ones trained to “handle” public relations.
- Invite a police officer to community meetings especially those related to youth topics.
- Conduct a survey about people's interactions with the police and a mirror study among the police would also be helpful.

- Promote Restorative Justice programs that explore communications and policies beyond jail time.
- Promote community conferencing as a form of alternative dispute resolution in neighborhoods.
- Invite police to be participants at community events where they are not necessarily the main agenda point, but just to be part of the community (e.g. block party, BINGO night).
- Bring back the police athletic leagues.

Group B Report - Law Enforcement's Perception of Returning Citizens

What preconceived ideas do law enforcement have about returning citizens?

- Police feel extra caution; they feel constantly threatened.
- Police often assume everybody's got a gun.
- Likely to not trust former offenders and to think they are probably likely to commit another crime.
- Confirmation bias: crimes confirm a bias that people of a certain type are "bad" people.



How can we can we improve dialogue between law enforcement officers and returning citizens?

- Invite an officer to an OFJ meeting.
- Invite a police speaker to an ethical society platform or panel discussion.
- Invite officers to see a powerful documentary or testimony by an ex-offender.
- All communities are built around shared meals so invite police, ex-offenders, and community members to a community dinner, for example, a potluck dinner at a community center.
- Try to understand the strain of the job and behave accordingly when interacting with law enforcement; never resist arrest, obey orders from officers.
- Neighbor Link in Stamford CT hires police for their workshops on stereotypes.
- Encourage voluntary interaction, Police Boy's Clubs, Police Athletic League.

Follow-up

This summary report will be sent to BES's Ethical Action Committee and the Board of OFJ for review and follow-up action. To learn more about this work and/or to volunteer, please contact:

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