

Community Organizations' Views of the Rochester Police Department: Part 1

Working Paper #2017-2
January 2017



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Introduction

Community policing was developed to promote strategies that support partnerships of the police and the community to proactively address immediate conditions of public safety such as crime and disorder. It is conducted mostly in urban impoverished neighborhoods. The police need the help of the people in the community to collaborate in solving crime and disorder issues. Community members include small business owners, individuals who live and work in impoverished areas, community leaders, schools, and government agencies. Each group plays an important role in building trust in the community with the police to help reduce crime (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016).

Residents and different organizations in Rochester, N.Y. have expressed concerns that they would like addressed by the Rochester Police Department (RPD) as RPD tries to build a better relationship with the community. This paper will review four groups of Rochester citizens' critical views of police conduct and ideas for reform. Through the review of web sites and Facebook pages from local organizations where citizens have concerns with the police department and Rochester Police Officers (RPO) we have identified three common areas of concern. The first concern involved the need to be heard when complaints are made to the RPD about RPOs. Police misconduct was the second concern by citizens in the community. The third concern that the community would like addressed is accountability for police misconduct.

Community Organizations' Views

Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party expressed that when complaints are made to the RPD regarding police misconduct, they would like their concerns addressed, not ignored. Citizens feel when complaints are made about police misconduct, use of excessive force, and false arrests, that officer's actions are without consequences. According to their websites and Facebooks pages, citizens feel their issues go

unresolved because they live in poor areas, such as Jefferson or Hudson Avenues. The Black Panther Party wants the RPD held accountable for their actions and punished when complaints are made about police misconduct. They also want to be reassured when a complaint is made, that their complaints are acknowledged and reviewed. The community wants their voices heard whether they live in the suburb of Pittsford or on Seward Street in the city of Rochester.

Rochester Coalition for Police Reform

Another issue of concern for Rochester residents are unwarranted stops in minority neighborhoods. The Rochester Coalition for Police Reform expressed concerns about the police targeting minorities in low-income neighborhoods. On Sunday, August 7th, 2016 between 10:30 p.m. and 11:30 p.m., seventeen-year-old Ricky Bryant stated at a press conference that he was riding his bike on Remington Street when he was stopped and assaulted by the police (Minority Reporter Staff, 2016). Once released from police custody, no charges were filed against Mr. Bryant.

The Rochester Coalition for Police Reform is asking for officers to be held accountable for their actions and to not have “excuses” made for their misconduct. Church organizations are working continuously with the police and the community to come together; they say that seeing videos of police using excessive force on men and women in the city of Rochester makes it hard to build a trusting community-police relationship.

Reverend Lewis Stewart, a member of the Coalition, states: “The police treat Blacks, Hispanics, and poor people as if they are not an American citizen, but as other people. If the police look at these groups as the other, then the police are going to treat minorities and the poor as the enemy, which reduces the chance for a productive dialogue between the police and minorities in impoverished neighborhoods.” Coalition members state that there should be a separate civilian review board with subpoena power and that RPO’s should wear body cameras. The Coalition is asking for

demographic details of people ticketed by the police to see if the police are issuing tickets based on age, race, or gender to improve transparency (City Newspaper Staff, 2016).

Enough Is Enough

Enough Is Enough, an anti-police brutality organization, feels that RPOs are discriminatory and are racially biased when dealing with African Americans in Rochester. The organization wants more transparency, to live in a community where the police treat residents with respect, and do not want their civil rights violated by the police (Communities United for Police Reform, 2012-2016). The RPD engages in activities with local groups such as the Police Activities League, Project TIPS (Trust, Information, Programs & Services), Clergy on Patrol, Rochester Youth Violence Partnerships, and others (Hand, 2016). According to adults and teens in the Rochester area, there are concerns that officers are making stops solely based on race.

Enough Is Enough collects stories from people allegedly abused by the Rochester Police and are working to improve Know Your Rights and Copwatch trainings. They stated that New York Civil Rights Law 50-a negatively impacts citizens right to know about police officers that can stop, question, arrest, and use force upon citizens without the public having any information on the officer involved in the incident. The New York Civil Rights Law 50-a prevents the public from obtaining reprimands, personnel records, or even legal suits brought against officers. Under New York Civil Rights Law 50-a, the Civilian Review Board cannot review an officer's records to see if there are patterns of abuse.

Enough Is Enough wants the New York Civil Rights Law 50-a abolished because they believe that it gives police officers life and death powers over citizens (Forsyth, 2015). Therefore, police actions and decisions should be transparent under the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), not covered up or remaining a secret to the public (Administration, Enough Is Enough, 2015). Chief Michael Ciminelli of the RPD has called meetings regarding solutions to improve community-police

relations (McLendon, 2014). Body worn cameras may be able to assist with transparency and accountability for police conduct. The cameras are being implemented to reduce use of excessive force by officers, to curtail stop and frisk, improve community police relations, and provide safety for the public (Stewart, 2015).

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter group expressed concerns about their First Amendment right to free speech and to protest peacefully. When minorities express their right to free speech and to protest prevalent issues, protesters would like to do so without marginalization. On Friday, July 8, 2016, 70 arrests were made and people complained of police brutality and wrongful imprisonment at a Black Lives Matter protest in Rochester. Some of the protesters made allegations of police using excessive force and tussling with a protester sitting on the ground. Anthony Dwyer of Rochester stated he was taking pictures during the protest. As Dwyer started to walk away, he stated the police tackled him to the ground and other citizens were beaten for no apparent reason. Maria Scipione, 60, of Rochester felt as if the police were “dehumanizing the enemy” which is what is done in the military. The RPD and Mayor Lovely Warren’s office stated the police handled the protest appropriately. Chief Ciminelli stated officers were leaving communities without coverage and were unable to keep up with emergency calls. Therefore, the police had to ask the protestors to leave or arrests were going to be made (Miller, Taddeo, & Singer, 2016).

Discussion and Next Steps

In summary, Rochester residents want more transparency and their complaints addressed. Residents also want the RPD and RPOs to take responsibility for their actions, and be held accountable when complaints are made regarding police misconduct. The community is aware of the need to work with the police to build a trusting relationship, but do not want to be harmed during initial contact.

They want to be treated as human beings and not be stopped due to racial profiling. If a clear and present danger exists, and people are not complying with officers, then arrests should be made. But arrests should be made without harm.

How can the RPD assure citizens in the Rochester community that excessive use of force by police will be diminished in impoverished neighborhoods? Citizens would like body worn cameras implemented for transparency, but want reassurance that the data will not be manipulated. Many questions about body worn cameras remain, including: when officers turn the cameras on and off and whether they may attempt to conceal police misconduct; if officers will be held accountable for misconduct; how data be used and who will be allowed to see the footage; and whether regulations exist regarding citizens' privacy concerns (Price, 2015).

The Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Policing addresses ways the police can improve community relations. The RPD can adopt and enforce policies that prohibit profiling based on race, sex, age, religion, and sexual orientation. Outside agencies can follow up on misconduct by police officers by giving community members surveys regarding the incident in question. Officers should avoid contact with citizens, significantly in impoverished neighborhoods, if contact is not related to improving public safety and reducing crime. Police departments should ensure that data is not manipulated on body worn cameras and that citizens' Fourth Amendment right to privacy is not violated by the cameras. Police departments should be required to collect, maintain, and report data to the Federal Government on police use of excessive force, officer-involved shootings, fatal or non-fatal, and deaths that occur while in custody of the police.

The Task Force on 21st Century Policing also suggests that law enforcement agencies explore better practices when officers respond to calls in impoverished neighborhoods by recruiting, training, and improving the officer's awareness in the community. New officers should be taught that their job

will not always consist of arresting individuals, but getting to know residents in the areas they patrol. Police officers should be assigned to the same neighborhoods so that residents can build a relationship with the officer and they can become familiar with one another. When relationships in the community are built between residents and police, both groups can begin to trust one another as they work together to make the neighborhood safe, while reducing crime and disorder (Ramsey, et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Rochester residents want more transparency, accountability, and better relationships between police and their community. Positive interactions between the community and the police should be publicized to show citizens that both groups are working together to develop a trusting relationship (Ramsey, et al., 2015). The second paper in this series will review five additional organizations that have worked with RPD for reform and/or have taken a legal approach to reform. The 21st Century Policing practices are only a portion of what can help resolve some of the tensions between the police and the community. Everyone involved should listen, be proactive, come together peacefully with an open mind, and communicate in a language that everyone understands so that citizens feel protected by the police.

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