

# **Community Organizations' Views of the Rochester Police Department: Part 2**

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## **Introduction**

Community policing promotes partnerships between the police and the community to proactively address public safety issues. Police need community members to collaborate with them to solve crime and disorder issues, especially in urban impoverished neighborhoods. The first paper in this series reviewed four reform-focused organizations' websites and Facebook pages for Rochester residents' concerns they want addressed by the Rochester Police Department (RPD) as they move forward to build a better relationship with the community. Three topics were repeatedly raised by Rochester citizens: 1) the need to be heard when complaints are made to the RPD about officers, 2) police misconduct and, 3) accountability for police misconduct. This second paper will review five additional organizations' websites to summarize efforts working with the RPD towards reform and/or legally-focused reform efforts.

## **Community Organizations' Views**

### **Teen Empowerment of Rochester**

Teen Empower of Rochester focuses on creating a language where teens, adults, community leaders, and the police can better understand one another. Teen Empowerment youth organizers are working on policy initiatives that engage public officials, let the youth be a voice in what policies are implemented, and work together to create systematic changes. Citywide initiatives include the "Youth Police Dialogue Project" which facilitates a conversation between the youth and police officers in the RPD (Teen Empowerment, 2016). The project was designed to create a better understanding for youth and police to ease tense interactions (Adams, 2016).

Teen Empowerment organizers also created "Solutions, Not Suspensions" to develop better discipline policies and school climates in the Rochester City School District (Teen Empowerment, 2016). They worked with the Rochester Community Task Force on School

Climate, who released a draft on how to discipline students in school and answered questions such as when to suspend and expel students from school (Dawson, 2015). Certain behaviors by students should be handled in school, not criminalized because of “zero-tolerance” policies that place children in facilities where they are cut off from families and the community. This may reduce the school-to-prison-pipeline, where students of color are taken out of public schools and placed in the juvenile and criminal justice system. Many students have learning disabilities, histories of abuse, neglect, and poverty; students would benefit from counseling services and additional education instead of involvement with the justice system (ACLU, 2016).

### **The Center for Dispute Settlement (CDS)**

The Center for Dispute Settlement (CDS) is a community advocate that was selected to be an impartial civilian oversight of law enforcement to provide an alternative resolution between the community and the police. The Civilian Review Board has the responsibility to thoroughly review all investigations completed by the RPD’s Internal Affairs or Professional Standards Section regarding allegations of police misconduct, use of excessive force, and actions that would make conduct of the officer criminal. Police officers investigate allegations of misconduct. Citizens review investigations and give their findings to the Chief to accept or reject these allegations. The benefit of having the Civilian Review Board assist with allegations of police misconduct is that they are objective reviewers who provide neutral and fair representation for both the community and the police. CDS is required to remain unbiased and impartial while reviewing complaints from the public about police misconduct (Walker-Cowart & Liberti, 2015). CDS’s part-time community advocate also assists citizens with filing complaints and accompanies citizens to interviews with RPD’s Professional Standard Section. The community advocate only utilizes N.Y. State Unified Court System certified mediators as

Civilian Review Board panelists for reviewing complaint investigations (Walker-Cowart & Liberti, 2015).

### **The Gay Alliance of Genesee Valley**

The Gay Alliance of Genesee Valley has an overall good relationship with the RPD per director Scott Fearing (Spector, 2016). Rochester, N.Y. reports hate crimes to the FBI against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) citizens, and none were reported in 2015 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

Rochester has an LGBTQ police task force (Spector, 2016). The RPD has made changes regarding police interactions with the LGBTQ community. Several policies were examined throughout the country, and therefore, the RPD revised their policies for gender expression. Based on how the person identifies themselves, the police will adhere to search policies for their gender, and transportation policies are based on gender expression as well. RPD is also working to improve LGBTQ issues in the workplace. Education, training, and new rules are key when working with the LGBTQ community (Broadcasting, 2012).

### **American Civil Liberties Union**

The national American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has addressed concerns regarding excessive use of force on African Americans. They are concerned about the deaths of unarmed men during stops by the police in the United States. ACLU has advised people on what to do if stopped by the police in hopes of preventing harm during initial contact with the police.

ACLU also has the Criminal Law Reform Project (CLRP), which wants to end harsh policies and racial inequalities in the criminal justice system. CLRP seeks to reform or abolish mandatory minimum requirements because they create long, harsh sentences for nonviolent crimes, which has led to mass incarceration (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016).

CLRP wants to reduce abuse of powers in the government, reduce disproportionate sentencing, and reform drug policies that will achieve public safety and health by placing people in rehabilitation centers instead of jail. People want more transparency, accountability, fairness, and less arrest disparities among minorities. CLRP's vision is that people of color in poor communities will no longer fear police presence, but create a better relationship between the community and the police (America Civil Liberties Union, 2016).

### **Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)**

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) has provided materials to educate people on what to do when stopped by the police. These materials were designed for citizens to have safe interactions with the police. The project came out of the national Criminal Justice and Community Relations Taskforce, a coalition of law enforcement and community leaders, to build stronger police-community relations (YWCA, 2016).

### **Discussion**

Paper one in this series focused on organizations that critique RPD and their ideas for improving police-citizen relations. In contrast, the five organizations reviewed above have focused on broader reforms or legal-focused actions. While both the YWCA and ACLU promote individual community members taking action by knowing their rights, the ACLU and Teen Empowerment have focused on the institutional level by seeking to reform inequities in the justice system. The Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley and Teen Empowerment both have worked to improve things at the police department level. In contrast, CDS's Civilian Review Board serves as a bridge between RPD and the Rochester community on instances of police misconduct.

One step RPD has taken to improve community-police relations was to have public meetings during November and December of 2016 through the 90 Days of Community Engagement initiative. The goal was to listen to residents and gather information on changes they would like to see regarding the police and the community. A main theme was that residents would like to have more meetings with the police, instead of coming together because of incidents in the media regarding police excessive use of force. “The community and the RPD needs to be proactive, not reactive, with more advertisement of meetings. With the help of the media, more residents can attend the meetings and express their concerns with regards to the police.” Instead, one resident stated they would like the police to have meetings “for the police to check in with residents” where they can address other significant problems in the community. Another resident stated they would like the “us versus them” attitude removed and for officers to answer from the heart when asked a question, not to answer “politically.” Publicizing events where citizens see the police coming together with residents in impoverished neighborhoods will build a positive relationship that maintain efforts to focus on continuing public safety. By collaborating with the police, residents, schools, churches and other stakeholders in impoverished neighborhoods provide a focus on intervention and prevention, build social connections, and deter crime (Ramsey, et al., 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Rochester residents want their complaints addressed, to be respected and treated fair by the police. Citizens also want to “connect with RPD, build trust, and develop a relationship that is no longer abusive” (Craig, 2016). RPD has taken steps to engage with organizations like the Gay Alliance and CDS as well as residents in Rochester, and should consider taking action on the ideas expressed by residents in both papers in this series. The RPD’s actions should go

beyond the 90-day community engagement and families should remember that structure starts at home.

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