

Case Study: Integrating Community Members into Reconciliation Listening Sessions in Birmingham

The Birmingham Police Department was holding successful listening sessions, but wanted to engage community members with lower levels of trust in police. Hiring a community reconciliation liaison made their outreach more effective.

Summary

Issue:

- Birmingham Police Department's Community Reconciliation Listening Sessions were productive but not engaging a wide range of community members
- Community members often felt apprehensive about participating in listening sessions organized exclusively by the police

Goals:

- Expand the scope of community engagement to include a broader range of community members in the reconciliation process
- Intentionally engage community members and groups who have traditionally had tense relationships with the police and/or had limited involvement in previous trust-building initiatives

Action:

- Give a community member a formal role within the police-community reconciliation process to support coordination, outreach, and facilitation

Overview and Context: Reconciliation and Listening Sessions

As a result of its involvement with [the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice](http://trustandjustice.org) (the National Initiative), a Department of Justice-funded pilot project to improve relationships between police and communities through the three pillars of implicit bias, procedural justice and reconciliation, the Birmingham Police Department (BPD) held a number of listening sessions as a part of its reconciliation process.

Listening sessions are direct, sustained dialogue between police departments and community members in which the police listen to the community's experiences of interacting with their department. They are an important component of any community trust-building strategy because many community members have a deep conviction that the police do not listen to them and are not genuinely open to community perceptions and ideas. Even when chiefs have formalized avenues for community engagement, such as 'town hall' style meetings or informal "Coffee with a Cop" activities, these

actions alone are not a substitute for genuine, respectful, and sustained attention and listening. This component of the reconciliation process is essential because it creates the opportunity for individual police-community relationships to be established in a non-adversarial environment. When police departments demonstrate their commitment to participating in ongoing listening sessions, it legitimizes their intentions to change practices.

Successes and Challenges of Listening Sessions

From August 2015 through June 2018, the BPD held 13 listening sessions with different focus communities in Birmingham, including survivors of domestic violence, youth from an alternative high school, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The listening sessions created opportunities for community members to share their personal experiences of interacting with the BPD, and brought to light specific issues for the department to address. During a listening session with survivors of domestic violence, the department learned that Protection from Abuse Orders (PFAs), a type of restraining order, were not accessible outside the precincts where they were first filed. This meant a survivor making a call for service outside of their precinct could not receive the protections they were entitled to because responding officers were unable to verify that a PFA was in effect. As a result of this listening session, the department immediately made the necessary administrative changes and has since received positive feedback from community advocates on the impact of this change.

Retired Captain Jerry Wiley, the National Initiative Site Liaison for Birmingham, described the listening sessions as highly valuable experiences but often questioned whether they reached the community members who were the most distrustful of the police department. Reflecting back on his time coordinating the listening sessions, he described how many community members simply “didn’t return [his] calls”, despite the department’s best intentions to engage with the wider community.

The role of a community Reconciliation Liaison

In September 2018, the National Initiative hired nationally-recognized community advocate, Ms. T. Marie King as the Birmingham Community Reconciliation Liaison on a part-time basis to coordinate and facilitate listening sessions between BPD and community members who had not yet been involved in the reconciliation process. Ms. King was uniquely suited for the role as she has been a long-time community organizer and was well connected to a broad network of communities across the city of Birmingham. Moreover, she had been trained as a “Community Procedural Justice Trainer” and had familiarity with other pillars of the National Initiative. Lastly, Ms. King is well-respected by the Birmingham Police Department.

Over the course of six months, she conducted active outreach to individual community members, as well as groups, and built relationships that would eventually lead to listening sessions with the BPD. Initially, she spent several weeks meeting with key stakeholders in the community to hear their concerns about policing and public safety and understand what themes were important to discuss in the impending listening sessions. These individual preparatory meetings enabled community members to develop a strong relationship with Ms. King and become more comfortable participating in a listening session that she would facilitate. Subsequently, Ms. King organized a total of six listening sessions, including sessions with representatives from the Hispanic community and with community activists who had been among the most outspoken critics of the BPD. While these listening sessions were often tense and filled with strong emotions, they provided the opportunity for newly-appointed Chief Smith to meet with and listen to community members the department had not successfully engaged with through its own efforts.

Carlos Alemán, Deputy Director of Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama described the value of Ms. King’s role, stating, “for us, she was really instrumental in establishing a connection with police. Prior to her intervening we had some meetings with police. Her intervention, her presence, facilitated the communication and established a set of ground rules on how we talked about our relationship with law enforcement.” In addition to her interpersonal and facilitation skills, Ms. King’s persistent but gentle outreach and initial relationship building were some of the key factors that contributed to her success in engaging otherwise hard to reach community members.

As a result of these listening sessions, a formal BPD liaison has been appointed to this Hispanic community and the department is currently developing a Youth Advisory council to amplify the perspectives of Birmingham youth. Perhaps most significantly, both Chief Smith and these community groups have committed to continuing to participate in these listening sessions in recognition of the long-term and ongoing commitment that is required to build trust.

Key Considerations for Integrating Community Members into Reconciliation listening sessions

1. Identify community facilitator/liaison.
 - a. Community members are more likely to respond to an invitation to a listening session if it comes from someone in the community they trust.
 - b. Potential community facilitators could be individuals with experience in facilitation, mediation, restorative justice, public speaking etc.
2. Ensure that the community member is appropriately compensated for their time.
 - a. Consider alternative sources of discretionary funding (such as small scale grants) so that the position is less reliant on lengthy budget approval processes
3. Recognize the time it takes for the Community Liaison to build relationships with community members before inviting them to a listening sessions.
 - a. Some listening sessions may take months to prepare for or may first require many small-scale preparatory meetings.
4. Listening sessions are often more productive and less adversarial when they are facilitated by a community member who is seen as credible by both community members and the police department.
 - a. Ensure that the community liaison also has time to build relationships with command staff so that their perspective is deemed credible.
5. Dedicate time to reviewing every listening session with the community liaison and making a clear list of the actionable items that need to be addressed as a result of the listening session.
 - a. Prioritize communicating any changes made to the community members who attended so they are aware of how the department is listening to their concerns.
6. Follow up with the same community members and try to have listening sessions on a monthly basis.
 - a. Persistent, commitment, and patience are often the most important components of any trust-building endeavor.

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