



Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability

Report:

Fall/Winter 2016

Citywide Community Conversations



Introduction

The Grassroots Alliance for Police Accountability is a broad-based coalition of community organizations committed to making our neighborhoods safer, improving police practices and accountability, and transforming the relationship between the Chicago Police Department and the communities it serves. GAPA came together in the summer of 2016, comprised of organizations working in communities that span the breadth of Chicago. GAPA groups touch more than 30 wards, including the neighborhoods most directly affected by violence and police brutality, misconduct, and harassment. GAPA works to ensure directly impacted community members—especially those in marginalized communities most affected by police misconduct—are deeply engaged in informing and advancing lasting solutions.

In November and December 2016, GAPA organizations brought together more than 1,650 residents in 19 “Community Conversations” in neighborhoods across the city. There were six Community Conversations on the Southeast Side, six on the Southwest Side, three on the West Side, three on the North Side and one on the Northwest Side. The purpose was to provide an opportunity for a broad and diverse group of Chicagoans to express their concerns about the Chicago Police Department, and begin to develop and advocate for plans to improve police accountability and community-police relations. Participants generated nearly 300 different suggestions. This report highlights the key themes that emerged and the ideas repeated most frequently in many different communities.

The Community Conversations required weeks of planning. Each GAPA organization created a steering committee of 10-20 community leaders. The steering committees met regularly to learn, analyze, and plan. They also met citywide to encourage idea-sharing across communities.

Local leaders began each Community Conversation with an educational component that gave important background information on many issues about policing and police accountability. Then, community leaders facilitated a set of small group discussions where participants talked about how they would like to see policing change in their communities. The conversations were open, honest, sometimes painful, sometimes inspirational, always overflowing with insights into ways to create real, sustainable change.

The first set of meetings was just a starting point for what will be a much deeper, richer set of conversations. These are not yet formal recommendations. It is important to note GAPA is not representative of all the marginalized voices in Chicago. We recognize and stand in solidarity with the many community groups and stakeholders which have worked on issues around police accountability for the last several decades. We look forward to meaningful alignments that will lead to safer communities for all Chicago residents.

Over the next several months, GAPA organizations will continue to meet, dig more deeply into issues that have been identified and the ideas generated, prioritize them, and then work to develop a reform agenda and an action plan. We will engage their steering committees, community leaders and members, and other stakeholders in a process of learning from police accountability models around the country, and discussing and debating what police accountability could look like in Chicago. GAPA will ensure the voices of Chicago's most vulnerable are informed and lifted up in the creation of a community oversight board for the Chicago Police Department.

While the Community Conversations were full of pain, frustration and anger, there was a great deal of hope. Participants didn't just suggest tweaks to police department policies and procedures, or small-scale reform for oversight and accountability systems. Rather, they talked about transformational change—fundamentally rethinking the role of the police officer, reimagining the way police officers interact and engage with residents, and restructuring the way the police department is governed in order to ensure that it embraces the values and priorities of the people it serves.

I. The Current State of Community-Police Relations

Most of the small group conversations began with painful recounting of the current state of community-police relations. Many participants talked about a long history of disrespect, abuse and humiliation that marginalized communities have suffered at the hands of police. They said it has created deep mistrust and fear. Person after person described daily degradation where police officers treat law-abiding people like they are criminals, especially in predominantly black and Latino communities. In the words of one participant, "Police come into the community and see everyone as a criminal. . . . Police do things and get away with things in our community that they would never dare in other communities." For example, some told stories about youth who are picked up by police and dropped off alone in an unfamiliar neighborhood or on the other side of a gang boundary.

Many participants also talked about daily interactions with police officers who seem not to care about residents' well-being, act in an abusive manner and use extremely demeaning language. These interactions are offensive and dehumanizing. As a result, many law-abiding residents in predominantly black and Latino communities don't just mistrust the police, they fear them. Some went so far as to describe the police as "an occupation force," and to describe policing as a system of oppression that is like "modern day slavery."

Many participants described police officers who use aggressive tactics when they aren't justified. They said police stop, frisk, handcuff and sometimes arrest people, chase on foot, and stop cars—all without cause. The police use vague laws against "disturbing the peace" and "disorderly conduct" to break up harmless behavior that should not be criminalized. This emphasis on aggressively stifling minor offenses puts young people and racial minorities—many of whom depend heavily on public space for socializing—at greatly increased risk of hostile encounters with police. Complaints about these tactics

came most often from residents on the South and West Sides, and from people of color living on the North Side, leading participants to conclude that racism is at the core of this abusive and humiliating behavior. Racial prejudice and rampant institutional racism in the Chicago Police Department must be acknowledged and addressed.

This overly aggressive police behavior doesn't just cause harm to its direct victims. Participants said it also makes it harder for the police to address real problems and solve crime. Many participants said they will not call or cooperate with the police because they fear any interaction with police could be harmful. And the harm can be toxic, corrosive and long-term. As one participant stated, "Community members who have experienced trauma as a result of police brutality will have a very hard time ever seeing police in a positive way." Aggressive policing makes people less safe. Police officers who are disrespectful, biased and violent have poisoned the communities in which they work and made it far less likely residents will work with any police officers to fight crime and keep peace.

Policing in Immigrant Communities

Many of the Community Conversations focused intensively on the harmful impact of aggressive police practices in immigrant communities—an issue that was largely overlooked in reports from the Police Accountability Task Force and the Department of Justice. Many of the problems described above are multiplied in immigrant communities, where language, cultural barriers and unfamiliarity with U.S. systems can add layers of complexity and confusion. In Latino and Muslim communities, proposed federal policies and anti-immigrant rhetoric have heightened fear that any interaction an immigrant has with police could put them in jeopardy of being deported.

Participants emphasized the enormous challenges faced by undocumented immigrants. Undocumented immigrants feel they simply cannot trust that police are there to serve and protect them.

II. Rethinking the Relationship Between the Police and Community

Against this background of profound and pervasive mistrust and fear, most participants argued that strengthening the police accountability system or tweaking police policies and procedures is not enough. Throughout the Community Conversations, people grappled with ways to fundamentally rethink the role of the police officer and restructure the way in which police officers interact with residents.

There was an overwhelming belief that in order for police to work more effectively to keep communities safe, they need to spend substantially more time deliberately building relationships and trust with local residents. Some participants emphasized that all police officers, from beat cops to sergeants, lieutenants, commanders and others in leadership positions, should adopt this new approach. As one participant noted, “We need to change what it means to be a police officer.”

Many cited the need to create frequent opportunities for communication between community members and police officers that are not focused on responding to a problem or a crisis, but simply on dialogue and relationship building. Many emphasized that it is especially important for the police to build stronger bonds with youth.

The shift in approach should affect every facet of interaction with community members, beginning with the basic value of common courtesy, like waving and saying hello, avoiding the use of profanity, especially around young people and seniors.

A majority of participants believes that when trust is built and relationships are improved, residents and police will collaborate to make neighborhoods much safer than they are currently.

Specific ideas included:

- Change the way police officers are deployed so more of them can stay assigned to a community for longer periods and develop deeper relationships and more community knowledge
- Spend less time in police cars and more time walking or biking the beat
- Have police officers at all levels attend and take part in more community meetings and events, and support the work of afterschool programs and community centers
- Reduce or eliminate the police presence in schools
- Engage in retreats with community members and local organizations to build trust
- Explore creation of civilian community liaison jobs that would be held by local community residents
- Rethink the function of police stations and make them “more like community centers instead of fortresses”
- Provide training for community members to help address their “biases” toward police

III. Revamping Police Tactics

The same basic idea emerged again and again—overly aggressive policing tactics must be abandoned. They are degrading, dehumanizing and probably illegal. They make it impossible to build the trust and working relationships that both residents and police need to fight crime and reduce violence. Participants often compared aggressive policing to a “military style, ‘us against them’” mindset, which places community members in the “enemy” category.

Specific ideas included:

- Develop clear policies about use of force and placing a much greater emphasis on de-escalation and non-violent intervention
- Discontinue the use of “stop and frisk” tactics and prohibit detention without legitimate justification
- Stop the use of vague laws against “disturbing the peace” and “disorderly conduct” to target people, especially young men, who pose no apparent threat to public safety
- Stop the over-criminalization of low-level misdemeanors like possession of small amounts of drugs, as this does little or nothing to make communities safer and much more to erode trust and damage relationships

IV. Policies and Procedures

Real progress will require comprehensive reform of police department policies and procedures, including changes in the way police officers are recruited, screened, and hired, how they are trained, how they are supervised and how they are disciplined.

A. Recruitment, Screening and Hiring

Many participants believe a police force that better reflects the city’s racial diversity will better serve its diverse communities. Currently, Chicago’s population is 32 percent black and 28 percent Latino, but the police force does not reflect that diversity. Some participants said a representative police force would be more likely to understand community residents and feel a strong and positive connection. Others stated African American and Latino officers do not necessarily treat their own race better than white officers. However, a larger number of African American and Latino officers could still make a difference. As one participant said, “Police officers of color may feel the need to impress their white colleagues and end up treating their own race unfairly. A larger number of minority officers could help avoid this.”

Some participants emphasized that recruitment, screening and hiring should also consider factors such as language, age, gender, gender-identity, sexual orientation, and place of origin. They highlighted the need to hire more African Americans and women of color, as well as more Latino police who understand the immigrant experience and speak Spanish.

Specific ideas included:

- Formally engage community members in the recruitment, screening and hiring process
- Screen applicants for implicit bias
- Work deliberately to build relationships with youth from underrepresented communities and demographics in order to create a pipeline of potential recruits
- Require recruits to reside in the community in which they work, or give preference to those who live and commit to remain in the community in which they work.

B. Training

Many emphasized the need to improve police training for both new recruits and experienced officers. They focused on the opportunity to train officers in and about the communities they serve, and to create training programs that challenge implicit biases, promote understanding about cultural norms, increase cultural sensitivity, and teach relationship-building skills.

Specific ideas included:

- Hold training sessions in communities to create opportunities for interaction with residents, social service providers, spiritual leaders and youth
- Engage community members as training facilitators
- Expand and improve training on de-escalation techniques and other strategies to minimize the use of force
- Expand and improve training for dealing with special challenges like mental illness, domestic violence and substance abuse
- Expand and improve training to increase cultural awareness about race, ethnicity, religions, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and class

C. Supervision

Many participants noted that good hiring and training aren't enough to ensure success and argued that there should be more thorough and systematic ongoing evaluation of police officers to determine if they are still fit to serve and if they need counseling or support.

Specific ideas included:

- Establish an annual assessment of officer "fitness for duty"
- Conduct more frequent mental health screenings, especially for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Create a warning system that identifies officers who receive more frequent complaints and putting systems in place to either help address the underlying issues or to take troubled officers off the streets

D. Accountability

Many participants shared deep frustration about a police accountability system they frequently described as "broken." They repeatedly mentioned how infrequently allegations of police misconduct result in actual discipline, and that even in the relatively rare situations when police officers are disciplined, the punishment often does not match the offense. One participant noted, "Being suspended with pay is not a punishment. It is a vacation."

Many expressed outrage about the staggering cost of legal settlements for police misconduct—more than \$660 million between 2004 and 2016, or approximately a million dollars a week, paid for with tax dollars. Many participants said that if accountability was not improved and made consistent, none of the other improvements would make much of a difference.

Specific ideas included:

- Discontinue the use of suspension with pay
- Establish a zero-tolerance policy for lying, and fire officers found to have lied in an official report
- Explore whether police officers can lose seniority or pension benefits if found to have engaged in more serious misconduct
- Create an anonymous hotline for police to report police misconduct

E. Police Union Contracts

At many Community Conversations, participants emphasized police union contracts must be changed in order to strengthen the accountability system and to improve community-police relations. They pointed to specific contract provisions that discourage people from filing complaints, make it easy for officers to lie about misconduct, require destruction of evidence and foster the “code of silence” that usurps transparency and shields police officers from appropriate discipline.

Specific ideas included:

- Allow community representatives to take part in union contract discussions to ensure their concerns are represented and addressed
- Remove the contract provision that states that a complaint must be accompanied by a signed affidavit
- Remove the contract provision that forbids anonymous complaints about police misconduct
- Remove the contract provision that allows officers to wait 24 hours before they can be questioned about use of force
- Remove the contract provision that requires the destruction of police disciplinary records
- Provide incentives and protections for police officers who report misconduct by other officers

F. Providing More Support for Police Officers

Participants frequently acknowledged police officers have an incredibly difficult and stressful job and expressed a strong belief that they must be provided with more support.

Specific ideas included:

- Expand and improve mental health support systems for officers
- Ensure officers receive treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder immediately after traumatic incidents

V. Community Oversight

The Police Accountability Task Force, created by Mayor Rahm Emanuel following public outrage over the killing of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald by Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke, included as one of its most important recommendations that Chicago expand its police accountability system by creating a new community oversight board. The task force wrote, “If the Community Board is to earn the legitimacy it requires and deserves, its precise powers and makeup should not be set by the Task Force, but should be developed with broad public input.” One of GAPA’s primary functions is facilitating a community-driven process to do the work the task force described.

In the months ahead, GAPA organizations will convene extensive community-based conversations to develop recommendations about an oversight board. Two key challenges will be determining what powers the oversight board should have and how members should be selected.

In the first round of Community Conversations, preliminary themes emerged. Most of all, the oversight board must be independent, accountable to the community and allow authentic community involvement in decision making. Many expressed deep skepticism about whether a board selected by the mayor could satisfy such criteria. Some suggested open elections for board positions as the most effective course. Some questioned whether open elections would allow powerful interests to interfere and weaken accountability and community involvement.

Specific ideas included:

- Choose members of the community oversight board through election
- Create a selection process that ensures the community oversight board is diverse and representative of communities across Chicago
- Create “neighborhood councils” to increase neighborhood involvement and representation
- The community oversight board should play a role in the selection of the police superintendent and other top CPD officials
- The community oversight board should appoint the head of the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (established by the Chicago City Council in October 2016 to investigate the most serious cases of potential police misconduct and make recommendations about discipline)
- The community oversight board should be able to make recommendations about appropriate punishment for police misconduct
- The community oversight board should have an important role to play in setting CPD policies and procedures

VI. Community Resources

Finally, many participants recognized that safer communities require much more than better policing and improved community-police relations. One participant said, “Most crimes are crimes of poverty and hunger; yet we still are lacking in jobs and being able to access fresh and healthy food. Hurt people hurt people, yet we are lacking in mental health clinics and counselors.”

Others urged that more resources be devoted to mentoring and counseling programs, and social services to support youth and steer them away from crime and violence. Some suggested the police department work directly with civilians to address some difficult situations without force or violence.

Specific ideas included:

- Have counselors and social workers support and accompany police, especially in cases of domestic violence or mental illness
- Create partnerships between the police department and service providers like shelters in order to provide better support to homeless people, transgendered youth and other vulnerable populations
- Support restorative justice programs that empower community members to directly address non-violent crimes
- Shift some money from the police department budget and use it to support schools, after school programs, mental health and social work services, job preparation work and other non-police activities that make communities safer

VII. Next Steps

GAPA is committed to an ongoing process of community participation and education that mobilizes community members and engages them in making meaningful change related to police accountability and improving community-police relations, all for the purpose of creating safer communities and a more just system. Over the next several months, GAPA will develop more formal recommendations focused on the most actionable and impactful issues.

Most significantly, GAPA organizations are already working with community stakeholders to develop recommendations to create a meaningful and effective community oversight board. GAPA also will focus on CPD policies and procedures impacting accountability, police recruitment and training, and diversion of low-level offenders from the criminal justice system.

The work ahead is incredibly challenging, but if we rise to the challenge, it also will be historic.