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OFFICE OF  
POLICE OVERSIGHT

# TOWN HALL ON PUBLIC SAFETY

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES  
AND POLICING

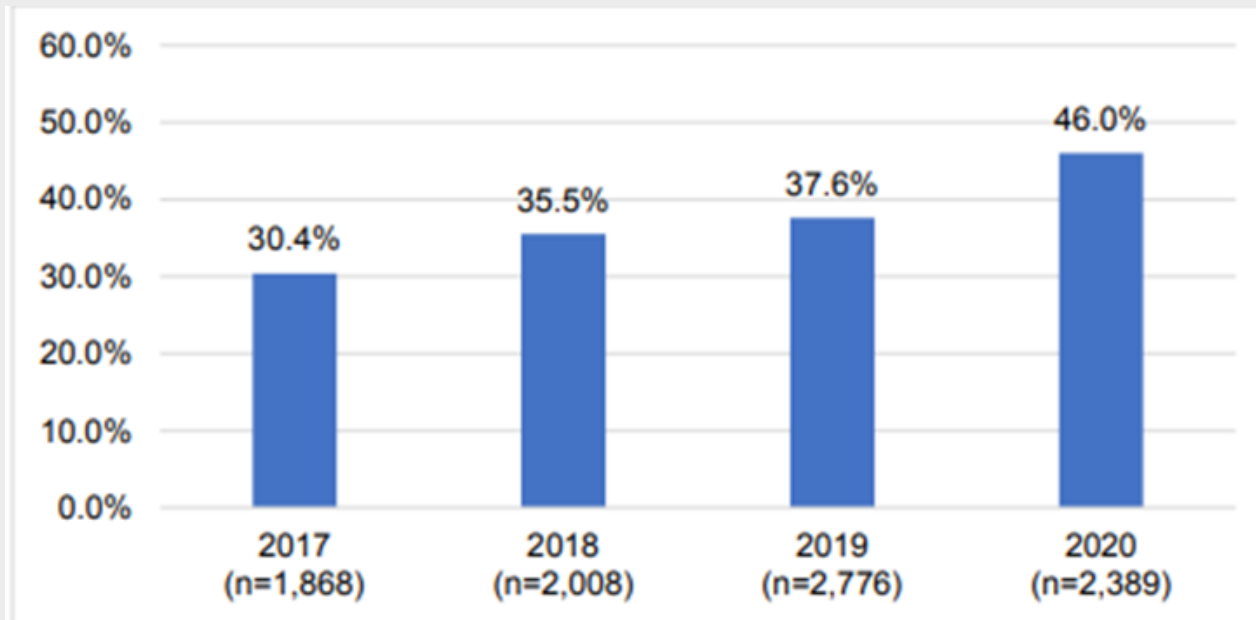
# INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the Office of Police Oversight (OPO) launched an initiative to address the concerns of community members living with disabilities and their experience with policing in Austin, Texas. In collaboration with the Mayor's Office, the Equity Office, the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, and community advocates, OPO hosted two community events to learn more about the experiences that people with disabilities—both visible and invisible—have with the Austin Police Department (APD). The Office of Police Oversight developed recommendations based on community feedback to improve interactions between community members with disabilities and APD.

## BACKGROUND

Thus far, the City of Austin's efforts to study the experiences that people with disabilities have with law enforcement have focused on the interactions between police and people living with mental health conditions. For example, the Office of the City Auditor published a report in 2018 analyzing the Austin Police Department's response to mental health-related calls for service. The report analyzed fatal police encounters in the fifteen most populated cities and found that APD had the highest per capita rate of fatal police shootings involving persons believed to be experiencing a mental health crisis.

In 2022, consultants retained by the City of Austin released further research examining APD's use of force involving individuals with behavioral and mental health conditions. The consultants found that, between January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2020, APD officers used force against 9,041 individuals, 3,422 (38.7%) of whom were perceived by APD officers as "mentally impaired." Additionally, between 2017 and 2020, there was a 94% increase in the use of force experienced by community members who were perceived by APD officers as "mentally impaired," from 30.4% in 2017 to 46.0% in 2020.



**GRAPH 1: PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING FORCE WHO WERE PERCEIVED TO BE MENTALLY IMPAIRED, BY YEAR.**  
**DATA SOURCE: KROLL ASSOCIATES.**

While this data highlights a critical issue, community members with disabilities have raised concerns about the narrow focus of this research and identified gaps in the findings. At the July 10, 2020, meeting of the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, multiple committee members voiced concerns regarding the negative experiences that people with disabilities often have with law enforcement. Committee members objected to the lack of data on people with disabilities beyond mental health.

***"So, it seems that equity doesn't include people with disabilities," said Committee Member Deborah Trejo at the Committee's July 2020 meeting.***

After receiving this feedback, OPO developed a plan to engage community members to learn about the experiences of people with disabilities when interacting with APD. On May 21, 2021, in collaboration with the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, the Mayor's Office, Equity Office, and OPO hosted the first Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing. During this virtual event, 42 community members shared their knowledge. This group included individuals with lived experiences, care providers, and others who wanted to listen and learn. The event offered closed captioning and interpretation in American Sign Language, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Additional context and findings from the first town hall event are available [here](#).

Based on the feedback from community members at the 2021 Town Hall (see "Implementing Feedback"), OPO determined a second event was needed to further address concerns about intersectionality and community engagement, and OPO identified a need to integrate community experts into the planning process. OPO recruited a wide range of community experts to join the planning committee, including representatives from [SAFE Alliance](#), [Texas Parent to Parent](#), [ArtSpark](#), and [U.R. Our Hope](#). The planning committee worked with OPO to identify and incorporate best practices in accessibility, develop the event programming, and assist in the event promotion and execution.

The final town hall was a hybrid event held on June 25, 2022, hosted in person at the Asian American Resource Center and online over Zoom. City of Austin employees facilitated conversations about what intersectionality means to participants and how it affects community members' experiences. For online and in-person attendees, OPO offered interpretation in American Sign Language and Spanish. Additionally, OPO translated the event materials into Spanish and Braille.

## IMPLEMENTING FEEDBACK

Based on community feedback and recommendations from the 2021 Town Hall, several changes were implemented into the planning of the 2022 Town Hall.

**Recommendation: The next event should focus on building a greater sense of empathy and understanding for people with disabilities. The impact a disability has on an individual's life should be part of the event planning and conversations at the event.**

Fostering an environment of understanding and cultivating empathy were central to the planning process for OPO's second town hall for people with disabilities and policing. OPO developed a project plan reflective of this feedback by incorporating regular collaboration and consultation with several subject matter experts, including ten local advocacy organizations, to develop a program that centered attendees' lived experiences. OPO consulted with these stakeholders regularly to ensure that the program would address the specific concerns expressed in the feedback provided by community members.

**Recommendation: When promoting the event and crafting policies, City staff should give consideration to and encourage participation from people living with disabilities, especially those whose experiences also intersect with race, gender, class, and other social identities.**

During the town hall, OPO facilitated a group exercise using an intersectionality matrix to challenge participants with confronting the ways in which experiences of discrimination and oppression can be amplified when an individual is a member of multiple marginalized groups. During the exercise, participants emphasized a desire for policymaking that is more inclusive and accommodating of their unique needs.

**Recommendation: Conversations held at the event should include ideas for community engagement between law enforcement and people with disabilities.**

An entire segment of the event's program was set aside for small group discussions about the Austin Police Department's (APD) community engagement efforts. Participants were encouraged to share engagement suggestions with representatives from APD that they'd like to see implemented in future outreach initiatives targeted towards engaging with people with disabilities.



# METHODOLOGY

Seventy-five community members attended the meeting online and in person, including four APD officers and APD Chief Joseph Chacon. During the meeting, OPO staff and other City of Austin employees collected community feedback through two mechanisms.

First, all in-person and online attendees participated in a large group discussion centered around intersectionality. Second, attendees were separated into small groups to discuss (1) how the concept of intersectionality affects the experiences of people with disabilities and their interactions with law enforcement and (2) identify ways for APD to address concerns through community engagement tactics. Facilitators utilized Zoom's breakout room feature for online attendees to host the small group discussions. In-person attendees participated in small group discussions at tables throughout the venue.

The first discussion at the town hall examined an intersectionality table (Figure 1) and encouraged attendees to identify how living with a disability can be more challenging when an individual is also a part of other marginalized communities. Examples of intersecting groups included, but were not limited to, marginalized race, socioeconomic, and religious groups. Participants were asked to reflect on how their experiences have been affected by power structures that empower some groups to the detriment of others.

**Activity 1- Intersectionality Table**

Identity	With a power dynamic (-ism)	Who benefits?	Who is marginalized?
Race	Racism	White	BIPOC
Class	Classism	Wealthy, upper-class	Poor or impoverished
Gender	Sexism	Men	Women, intersex, trans, nonbinary
Age	Ageism	People aged 25-55	Under 25 and over 55
Ability	Ableism	People living without a disability	People living with a disability

- What's missing in the identities category? In other words, are there other identities that may impact an individuals' life?
- Based on your own personal experience, what category do you identify with most in your community?
- What category do you feel has the biggest impact on your experience with law enforcement in Austin?

**FIGURE 1: INTERSECTIONALITY TABLE**

For the second discussion, facilitators in the breakout groups asked questions to build an understanding of community members' lived experiences and gather feedback on how APD officers can improve interactions with community members. Facilitators used realistic scenarios to demonstrate the phases of a police encounter, and how those phases represent critical points for community members.

### Discussion Prompts

- An Austin police officer approaches you and asks you to provide them with your name and identification.
  - How would living with different types of disabilities, including your own disability, impact the outcome of this interaction?
  - Have you been treated differently because of your other identities?
- Now, the officer asks you to step aside for further questions.
  - How would living with different types of disabilities, including your own disability, impact the outcome of this interaction?
  - Have you been treated differently because of your other identities?
- The officer informs you that you are under arrest. They then tell you to turn around and put your hands behind your back.
  - How would living with different types of disabilities, including your own disability, impact the outcome of this interaction?
  - Have you been treated differently because of your other identities?
- How can we envision a better interaction that includes all disabilities and identities?
  - What would be an ideal outcome for you when interacting with law enforcement?
- What forms of community engagement would you like to see from APD?



Each breakout group was hosted by City of Austin employees who acted as facilitators and notetakers. Notetakers played important roles during the event. For online attendees, notetakers recorded community feedback shared during the conversations, as well as any comments left in the Zoom chat. For in-person attendees, notetakers paraphrased the conversation and noted direct quotes and key themes. OPO recorded audio from the in-person sessions and video from the online sessions.

OPO collected 191 responses from community members. The responses were aggregated and anonymized as qualitative data for synthesis. Data synthesis combines separate elements or components, identifies commonalities between the individual pieces, and draws conclusions from these common themes. This synthesis revealed reoccurring themes throughout the community feedback, either in response to the intersectionality or group conversation.

The feedback included numerous accounts of interactions with law enforcement ranging from exemplary to unfavorable. Attendees described experiences with police officers who were empathetic and thoughtful, as well as others that left them feeling intimidated or misunderstood and indicated a need for ongoing training and professional development. Community members noted that some of the negative experiences may also be attributed to a broader societal misunderstanding of people with disabilities. The feedback also included community members' suggestions for outreach strategies that officers could utilize to strengthen their relationships with people with disabilities.



# FINDINGS

The feedback from the discussions was aggregated and anonymized as qualitative data for analysis. OPO staff conducted a data synthesis of the community feedback from the event.

This section will feature statements summarizing the themes found in the feedback. To provide more context, each summary statement will be followed by direct quotes from event attendees. The quotations are unedited and were selected to represent the nuance in the community concerns about interacting with law enforcement as a person with a disability.



## FEAR AND VULNERABILITY

Community members with disabilities may feel vulnerable and powerless when interacting with law enforcement, contributing to an overall sense of anxiety and fear. This stress is amplified when people with disabilities are also part of other marginalized groups. These concerns often lead to an avoidance of police interactions altogether or seeking alternative resources for support.



***"When I get bad migraines, get fearful that an officer might pull up and think I'm under the influence, but really I'm just not feeling well. If students are under a lot of stress, they might have difficulty expressing themselves, and ka [sic] vocalization could be misinterpreted by officers. The staring off or absence of responsiveness of some seizures could be interpreted as ignoring a command from an officer. Make sure that officers are open-minded and have education about mental, physical, and other disabilities."***

## TRAINING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There are concerns that APD training is not inclusive of the various experiences of people with disabilities, which may lead to negative outcomes for community members. Town hall attendees expressed a need for more specified training about different types of disabilities, both visible and invisible, and the ways in which these conditions can require alternative methods of communication. Community members also expressed a desire to include social workers, medical professionals, and other service providers in the development of future training opportunities for law enforcement.

***"Is it possible to have a badge, icon on drivers' licenses or license plates, so to alert officers to the needs of the person they are encountering before tensions rise due to frustration of lack of understanding or willingness to communicate?"***

***"It's impossible for cops to be trained on all of this. We need specialists. We don't have one guy doing every part of the work at my job. We have guys who are specialists. We have eight, ten different specializations. Cops are the only rapid response we have for anything. If you need someone there right away, the only option you have is to call the police. We need to create rapid responses."***

## UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF DISABILITIES

There are assumptions about perceived levels of ability and a lack of knowledge about how both visible and invisible disabilities can be perceived. These misunderstandings can lead to miscommunications and unnecessary escalations in situations where community members with disabilities interact with law enforcement. It is important to recognize the diverse range of disabilities and for officers to become better equipped to accommodate all community members.



***"Disability isn't just one thing, there are so many things that don't present the same way. Thinking about situations like double amputees who has a wheelchair helper and being separated from them, are those things thought about are their policies regarding these types of actions? Knowing that every behavior is someone saying something, asking why's, what happened to your day, how are you doing? what I need to feel safe is a reimagining of these situations instead of just barking orders."***

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## RESEARCH

- APD should collaborate with the City Manager and OPO to provide regular public updates on the implementation status of recommendations from various consultants and reports to improve interactions between people with disabilities and APD officers. The City of Austin has invested in several consultants and reports on interactions between people with mental health conditions and APD officers. This includes the 2018 Office of the City Auditor analysis of APD's mental health response, the 2019 Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute report, the 2021 Office of Police Oversight report on use-of-force, and the numerous reports submitted by Kroll Associates over the last two and a half years. This research has yielded insightful findings and many actionable recommendations.

# DATA

- APD should examine how it documents, measures, and publishes data on interactions between officers and people with disabilities, specifically how data is collected, categorized, and reported to the public. Currently, APD's publicly available data related to people with disabilities is focused on the interactions between APD officers and people with mental health conditions. OPO is unaware of any public-facing data documenting the number of use-of-force incidents involving people with disabilities outside of a mental health condition. Until more thorough, quantifiable data is available, it will remain difficult to have a more complete understanding of the issues and make recommendations for informed, lasting improvements.
- APD should collaborate with community members to develop more inclusive ways to collect data representing the diverse lived experiences of people with disabilities. People with disabilities are often underrepresented, particularly regarding data that captures the diversity of their lived experiences. APD can address this gap by engaging with community members to determine how to define and track interactions. Across the feedback provided to OPO, community members repeatedly offered to provide input, feedback, or otherwise help APD improve its service delivery. This is an opportunity for APD to build trust with this community and collect meaningful data and develop actionable improvements to create positive change.
- APD should work with OPO to review complaints submitted by (or involving) community members who identify themselves as persons living with disabilities or mention key phrases, like assistive technologies or service animals. APD can review these complaints as general feedback to identify areas for review and improvement. APD can utilize this data and other feedback to improve the policies and practices that inform interactions with people with disabilities.

## DATA

As the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) states in its February 2021 report, *"What Police Chiefs and Sheriffs Need to Know about Collecting and Analyzing Use-of-Force Data,"* agencies cannot manage what they do not measure. Collecting high-quality data on use of force is a necessity. Readily available data are important for internal tracking. More detailed, high-quality data also contribute to legitimacy when information is shared externally with the public and media. And without data, there is no way to evaluate policies." In the report, PERF discusses its Use-of-Force Data Framework, which is a model for the who, what, where, when, and how of use-of-force data collection. In discussing the data framework, PERF highlights the importance of collecting high-quality use-of-force data, including data related to physical disabilities; properly analyzing it; and making it publicly available to inform policy changes.



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- APD should identify staff whose community engagement and outreach focus entails building positive relationships with people with disabilities to promote a more inclusive public safety landscape. The liaison should connect directly with people with lived experience and their support networks, like service providers, care providers, and family members, to seek insights and feedback from the community on how their needs could be better met by APD.
- APD should host multiple community engagement events each year to receive feedback directly from people with disabilities. These events should create a safe and inclusive space for people with disabilities to share their experiences, needs, and concerns with APD leadership. Additionally, APD should attend at least three community events annually that are hosted by organizations working with and for people with disabilities.
- APD should identify strategies for officers to increase their level of engagement with community members living with disabilities to build trust and demonstrate receptivity to community feedback.



## TRAINING

- APD should integrate relevant materials, including scholarly research, news articles, and writing by people with lived experience, into the APD training academy modules related to people with disabilities. These materials should augment the academy curriculum by providing anecdotal insights from people with various disabilities.
- Officers should be encouraged to pursue professional development and training opportunities that strengthen their ability to make meaningful connections with community members. APD should work with stakeholders to develop improvements to its professional training opportunities to equip officers with techniques and strategies to engage with community members with disabilities in alignment with national best practices in policing. A capstone for this training should include in-person experiences with community members with disabilities so that officers can build empathy and understanding.



# CONCLUSION

OPO developed this initiative in direct response to community members who advocated for action to address their concerns about interactions with law enforcement. OPO intentionally centered people with disabilities throughout this project, with the understanding that lived experience is lived expertise. OPO's goal was to listen to community members, learn from lived experiences, and develop actionable recommendations to improve their interactions with law enforcement. At each event, people with disabilities, advocates, and other stakeholders openly and honestly shared their experiences, concerns, and challenges related to interacting with law enforcement. OPO is grateful to the community members who trusted us to hold space for these critical discussions, and we sincerely thank all participants for their willingness to contribute.

OPO's recommendations focused on addressing the community's fears and concerns around a lack of understanding, respect, training, preparedness, and outreach. While this report highlights many areas for improvement, there are even more opportunities to build trust with community members and demonstrate a commitment to safety for all.

Community members have called on the City of Austin to take action to improve safety and create better interactions between officers and the public. The Austin Police Department has an opportunity to serve community members with disabilities by implementing OPO's recommendations. These recommendations will enhance safety and improve interactions between APD and people with disabilities by equipping officers with the tools and resources needed to increase understanding and knowledge.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This event was the product of collaboration with several partners who provided expert consultation to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. We are truly grateful for their help in making this work possible.

- Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities
- ArtSpark Texas
- U.R. Our Hope
- SAFE Alliance
- Texas Parent to Parent
- City of Austin's Americans with Disabilities Act Program
- Equity Office
- City of Austin's Communications and Public Information Office
- City of Austin staff volunteers
- Asian American Resource Center staff

City of Austin leadership also played a key role in ensuring this event's success. We appreciate their participation and support.

- Mayor Steve Adler
- City Manager Spencer Cronk
- Chief Joseph Chacon (APD)
- Lt. Lawrence Davis (APD)
- Officer John Gabrielson (APD)
- Officer Frank Creasey (APD)



# FURTHER READING

For additional information about the dynamics between law enforcement and people with disabilities, please see the resources linked below:

## Data

- [2020 Response to Resistance Data | Open Data | City of Austin Texas](#)
- [2022 10 3 2019 Data of S.D.3 - Number and percentage of use of force incidents in proportion to the number of arrests made | Open Data | City of Austin Texas](#)
- [S.D.3 2020 Reports by Subject Characteristics | Open Data | City of Austin Texas](#)
- [What Police Chiefs and Sheriffs Need to Know About Collecting and Analyzing Use-of-Force Data \(policeforum.org\)](#)

## Government Resources

- [Advancing Public Safety for Officers and Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities \(I/DD\) \(usdoj.gov\)](#)
- [Commonly Asked Questions About the ADA and Law Enforcement | ADA.gov](#)
- [Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities \(IDD\) Training for Jailers | Texas Commission on Law Enforcement](#)
- [Texas Driving with Disability | Office of the Texas Governor | Greg Abbott](#)

## Training Resources

- [PLECET Conference | \(plecetconference2023.org\)](#)
- [Police-Mental Health Collaboration Toolkit](#)
- [The International Association of Chiefs of Police Law Enforcement Policy Center](#)
- [Your Rights! People with Disabilities and Law Enforcement | Disability Rights California](#)