

Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing



OFFICE OF
POLICE OVERSIGHT

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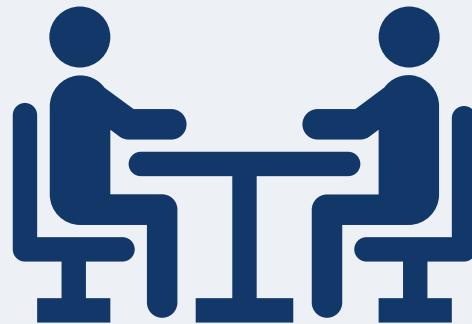
Background

On July 10, 2020, the Office of Police Oversight (OPO) attended the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities' monthly meeting. At this meeting, several committee members expressed concerns about OPO's efforts to address the negative experiences people with disabilities have with law enforcement.

In response, OPO collaborated with the Mayor's Office, the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, and the Equity Office to organize a community event to understand better the experiences people with disabilities have with law enforcement. The goal of the town hall was to create a space for people with lived experiences to share their feedback and stories related to their interactions with the Austin Police Department.

The event planning committee included representatives from the Mayor's Office, the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, and the Equity Office, with support from the City of Austin's Communications and Public Information Office and ADA staff.

The planning committee focused on ensuring accessibility in the virtual environment to facilitate meaningful participation with community members. OPO engaged with several community groups to learn how to support diverse accessibility needs virtually, including the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities, St. Edwards University Department of Social Work, and Art Spark Texas.



Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing

The Office of Police Oversight hosted the Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing event on May 21, 2021, virtually via Zoom. The event offered interpretation in American Sign Language, Spanish, Vietnamese and provided closed captioning.

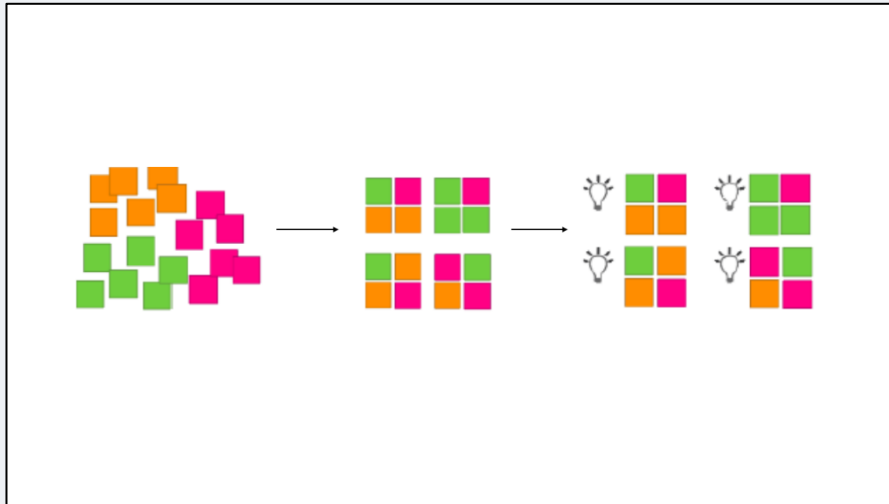
Forty-two community members attended the event. Austin Mayor Steve Adler and City Manager Spencer Cronk welcomed community members before attendees were separated into breakout rooms. Each breakout room had a City staff member serving as facilitators and notetakers to record community responses.

In the breakout rooms, facilitators asked community members to respond to the following questions:

- Who are you, what motivated you to come to this event, and what do you need to best communicate in this space?
- What is your experience with Austin police or law enforcement?
- What would it look like for you to feel safe when interacting with law enforcement?
- Can you identify ways that APD can improve your experience with police?
- What would you like to see discussed at the next town hall meeting?

Also in attendance were 21 members of city staff, the Office of Police Oversight Director Farah Muscadin, the Office of Civil Rights Director Carol Johnson, and the Austin Police Department (APD) Assistant Chief Jerry Bauzon.

Data Synthesis



During the event, City staff served as notetakers in each breakout room. Notetakers recorded responses from community members. During this event, OPO collected 196 responses from community members for analysis. The responses were aggregated and anonymized as qualitative data for analysis. OPO staff conducted a data synthesis of the community feedback from the event with staff from the City of Austin’s Center for Excellence and Innovation.

Data synthesis combines separate elements or components, identifies commonalities between the individual pieces, and draws conclusions from these common themes.

OPO will provide the findings in this report to the Mayor and City Council. Additionally, the findings will inform the planning of the next event as part of the series, Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing.

Insight #1:

Current law enforcement policies and practices are not designed for people with disabilities. Individuals with physical or psychological disabilities are often seen as a threat or viewed as dangerous by law enforcement. This perception by police officers often leads to people with disabilities having a negative interaction with law enforcement, resulting in misunderstanding, injury, or death.

- Some community members at the event said having a disability can cause individuals to be perceived as non-compliant when interacting with law enforcement.
- Other individuals said the lack of understanding of disabilities by law enforcement, coupled with aggression and the use of tools like guns, cause people with disabilities to become fearful. This sense of fear can lead to negative police outcomes such as injury or death.

Quotes from community members that helped form this insight include:

“There is a significant amount of distrust within the deaf community with law enforcement, several negative interactions were mentioned, cases where officers were either not responsive or had to really be pushed to provide service or support.”

“For visually impaired individuals, no eye contact can be misinterpreted by police.”

Insight #2:

APD needs to utilize more training resources, improve communication, and increase engagement with people with disabilities. With improved community relations, the burden of ensuring that law enforcement understands the unique needs of community members with disabilities does not fall on these individuals, their families, or their caretakers.

- Some participants said it is essential to have access to communication tools and technology that fit specific and unique needs so that people with disabilities can communicate directly with officers and not burden partners or other support systems.
- Other participants mentioned a need for more opportunities for individuals with lived experience to communicate with officers and APD at all levels about their experiences.

Quotes from community members that helped form this insight include:

“More Community engagement between APD and deaf community – regular opportunities or events where each side can get to know more of the other and what they each go through – Police would also be better served in having better access to interpreters.”

“Is there an event called coffee with a cop that APD used to host? There is a need for asking the questions that need to be asked, and building the trust with the community.”

Insight #3:

The outcome of police interactions for someone with a disability depends on whether an officer is aware of an individual's disability and need. This creates a disadvantage for people who don't have visible disabilities.

- Some participants said when police officers are respectful and empathetic of an individual, the outcomes are positive. However, when police officers are disrespectful and don't accommodate people with disabilities, the outcomes are negative and result in harmful experiences.

Quotes from community members that helped form this insight include:

“Members of the deaf community would like more members of the public and representatives of it to better understand the challenges and adversity that they face.”

“Some people have disabilities that are not physical and visible but still existent, and law enforcement may not understand that.”

Insight #4:

There is an intersection of other identities among people with disabilities. Therefore, when making policy, consideration must be given to people uniquely impacted by various social categorizations such as race, class, and gender identities.

- Many participants called for a need to focus on the intersectionality between race and disability.

Quotes from community members that helped form this insight include:

“As a Black parent of a child with disabilities, it’s very difficult to even consider calling the police in an emergency.”

“I don’t call the cops. I am a rather large black man with a son with a disability, and it is not safe to do so for me. We’ve all seen the videos. It is a lot of risk that I am unwilling to take.”

Insight #5:

When police are called to school systems, it disproportionately affects students of color with disabilities, creates an environment that may harm students of color with disabilities, and plays a role in the bigger picture of systemic racism in the criminal justice system. Moreover, this can lead to long-lasting effects of trauma for students of color with disabilities.

- Some participants said parents and educators are afraid of contacting the police because of the socioeconomic effects of realities like the school-to-prison pipeline.

Quotes from community members that helped form this insight include:

“We need to break these conversations down by age groups, and also know what is being discussed in other groups with all types of disabilities. Police are playing a role in generational trauma like with ACES.”

“I currently home school my child. My child with a disability can be arrested at the age of 10 years old.”

Insight #6:

The lack of understanding, resources, and training for officers has negatively impacted individuals experiencing mental health crises. APD should provide more mental health resources for officers to improve interactions between law enforcement and people with mental health issues.

- Some participants said current APD practices are unsafe for people with disabilities, which can be corrected with training around mental health and disabilities.

Quotes from community members that helped form this insight include:

“The police aren't necessarily who we should be calling for such a broad range of responses, and it might be more helpful and beneficial for the community, especially those experiencing a mental health crisis to create or to support and fund creative and innovative ways of helping people that are in crisis.”

“Community members would feel safer if officers were receiving more training in de-escalation and mental health.”

**Office of Police Oversight
Recommendations for
2022 Event**

**Townhall on Public Safety: People with
Disabilities and Policing**

Recommendation #1:

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.

- More time should be given to individuals with lived experiences to share their stories.
- More individuals with lived experiences need to be a part of the planning committee.
- Professionals and caregivers should have space at the event to educate others.
- There should be increased participation from Austin Police Department's (APD) at the next event.

Recommendation #2:

When promoting the event, City staff should encourage and accommodate people with disabilities, especially those whose experiences also intersect with race, gender, class, and other social identities.

- Conversations held at the event should consider how intersectionality plays a role in an individual's life.

Recommendation #3:

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

- Questions asked at the event should focus on how we can collectively work together to improve community-police relations between individuals with lived experiences and law enforcement.

Recommendation #4:

Conversations held should also focus on the unique experiences that students with disabilities have in the education system.

- The questions asked at the event should focus on improving the education system for students with disabilities.
- Education professionals and teachers should be a part of the planning committee for the next Town Hall.

Contact Information

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