

Follow up on the themes raised by the 2015 summer Dialogues on Race Key areas addressed by the City of Worcester and Call for Community Initiatives

Summary

The City Manager's Community Coalition Against Bias and Hate Crimes convened a seven week series of dialogues to address race relations from May 18th-to July 13th, 2015. Between 140-280 people attended each session. The following report is intended to inform the community of ongoing work in the areas of diversity and inclusion and to encourage continued conversations and efforts city wide.

Background

In the early spring of 2015 Mayor Joseph Petty and City Manager Edward Augustus invited the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice to help guide the city through conversations concerning critical issues-changing demographics; racial, cultural and health disparities; and law enforcement and legal responses- that have happened in our nation as well as our own communities.

The City Manager's Community Coalition Against Bias and Hate Crimes (Coalition) was asked to convene and organize the sessions. During the development of the dialogues, the Massachusetts Attorney General Office lent support to the effort by providing AGO staff to serve as facilitators and notetakers at each dialogue session. Community leaders also joined as facilitators and notetakers to ensure that the large number of participants who turned out could join in a small group conversation.

The dialogues were not intended to address any one particular incident. Rather they were an opportunity for members of the community to talk, and listen, to one another about critical issues facing our city.

The framework for the dialogues was reflected by the April 28, 2015 informational report to the Worcester City Council by the Office of the City Manager. This report was the product of the city manager's internal assessment of government operations and policies that was produced through a series of meetings with cabinet and division heads. In addition the city manager met with community members to get their input about how the city administration could better address ongoing tensions in the community some of which were stated as a perceived lack of access to government leaders, feelings of alienation, need for increased community participation and communication and a call for increased community input about what is working and what is not in the city of Worcester.

Dialogue participants were provided copies of this report and were encouraged to familiarize themselves with this document; critique it, if necessary, and recommend actions that reflect the group dialogue.

We hoped to inspire, through the dialogues, similar frameworks or plans of action in the private sector and other public agencies and non-profits.

Why hold a community dialogue?

A dialogue is a forum that draws participants from as many parts of the community as possible to exchange information face-to-face, share personal stories and experiences, honestly express perspectives, clarify viewpoints, and develop solutions to community concerns.

Unlike debate, dialogue emphasizes listening to deepen understanding. Dialogue invites discovery. It develops common values and allows participants to express their own interests. It expects that participants will grow in understanding and may decide to act together with common goals. In dialogue, participants can question and reevaluate their assumptions. Through this process, people are learning to work together to improve race relations.

The nature of the dialogue process can motivate people to work towards change. Effective dialogues do the following:

- *Move towards solutions rather than continue to express or analyze the problem.* An emphasis on personal responsibility moves the discussion away from finger-pointing or naming enemies and towards constructive common action.
- *Reach beyond the usual boundaries.* When fully developed, dialogues can involve the entire community, offering opportunities for new, unexpected partnerships. New partnerships can develop when participants listen carefully and respectfully to each other. A search for solutions focuses on the common good as participants are encouraged to broaden their horizons and build relationships outside their comfort zones.
- *Unite divided communities through a respectful, informed sharing of local racial history and its consequences for different people in today's society.* The experience of "walking through history" together can lead to healing.
- *Aim for a change of heart, not just a change of mind.* Dialogues go beyond sharing and understanding to transforming participants. While the process begins with the individual, it eventually involves groups and institutions. Ultimately, dialogues can affect how policies are made.

The following is a list of achievable goals that could be obtained through the dialogue process:

- To improve our neighborhood by building bridges across racial lines
- To build new relationships
- To bring people together who do not typically talk to one another

- To influence attitudes of local law enforcement
- To better understand other cultures
- To open up new economic possibilities
- To create bonds between organizations that do not usually work together

The design of the dialogues:

The dialogues were open to everyone. Participants did not have to live in the city of Worcester to participate and they could attend one, some or all of the sessions. The dialogues were also open to the press to observe and report. The sessions started with an introductory meeting and then subsequent sessions were topic specific, focusing on the following areas: Representative Government, Public Safety, Youth and Education, Media and Online Social Networks, and Economic Development. The final session was a wrap up session.

The evening sessions were designed to support and encourage working individuals and families' participation. A free dinner was provided prior to the start of each session thanks to the generous support of the Greater Worcester Community Foundation and free childcare was provided by the childcare staff of the YWCA of Central Massachusetts. Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) was provided at all sessions for the deaf and hard of hearing and Spanish interpreters were also available.

Ground Rules were reviewed and discussed during every session and each small group had an opportunity to add additional rules to encourage dialogue. The ground rules were as follows:

1. Respect for each others viewpoint, even if we disagree with it;
2. Only one person can speak at a time;
3. Participants may suggest additional ground rules.

The Coalition responded adapted and learned from each session and participant feedback was taken into consideration and changes were made to accommodate needs expressed by participants. As a result, a participant and media expectation guideline was developed and distributed, a glossary of terms was distributed and venue changes and transportation was provided for thanks to the help of Worcester Technical High School and the WRTA.

Review of the sessions:

The first session was held on Monday May 18th and titled an Overview of Dialogue Process and Setting the Stage for Dialogue at the YWCA of Central Massachusetts.

Participants were broken into small groups for discussion. Some of the themes that were presented about why participants had chosen to attend included the following:

- Tension in city needs to be understood, resolved
- Personal growth
- Education for better service

- Black lives matter
- Looking for action
- Avoid becoming like Ferguson

When asked what participants needed from the dialogues the following themes emerged:

- Common definitions
- Representation from entire community
- People to speak and listen
- Outreach, language and transportation
- Transparency, everyone at the table
- Youth involvement
- More time
- Action, not just information
- Value change, inclusion, diversity
- Short and long term goals, engage community over long term
- Better understanding of bias, prejudices and microaggressions
- Leadership commitment to greater diversity in leadership

The vision statements for what participants sought from the dialogues included:

- Want to hear solutions, proactive and accountable plan
- Respectful dialogue throughout the City (institutions, gov't, business, education etc.),
- Need mechanism for those who are feeling voiceless and to reach diverse community
- Want good housing and jobs for everyone
- Working and living city

The subsequent five sessions focused on specific topics and those sessions and the questions and desired outcomes from the discussions are listed below:

June 1st, Representative Government, Quinsigamond Community College

Questions:

1. What are my main concerns?
 - If representative gov't is truly inclusive what would it look like? How would I know it is working?
2. What is my recommended action? What actions should the city take to address underrepresented concerns?
3. What am I willing to do, as an individual and with others, to make a difference? What organizations/groups could help move these suggestions forward?

Desired Outcomes:

1. A list of ways representative government is and isn't advancing the needs of marginalized groups/ under-represented constituents and communities.
2. Shared understanding of how representative government might change to address under-representative constituent's concerns.

June 8th, Public Safety, Belmont AME Zion church

Questions:

1. What are your main concerns about public safety organizations?
2. What roles do you think the police, in particular, should play in our community, and how effective are they in fulfilling those roles?
3. What actions can the police, fire, medical emergency responders or other public safety officials take to regain or enhance your trust? What can the community do to regain or enhance trust in public safety organizations?
4. What can we ALL do to ensure that public safety organizations work more effectively?

Desired outcomes:

1. A list of ways local public safety organizations are and are not helping marginalized groups/ under-represented constituents and communities feel safe and protected.
2. Shared understanding of how public safety organizations might change to address under-representative constituents' concerns

June 15th, Youth and Education, Technical High School

Questions:

Brainstorm a list of answers to this question:

1. How does racism affect young people's educational opportunities and experiences?
2. What can educators do to address different forms of racism within the educational system? What can students do?
3. What can community organizations and faith based institutions do to help address these issues?

Desired outcomes:

1. A list of ways racism affects young people in their educational experience/process.
2. A list of ways the education system intervenes or can intervene against racism as it educates young people.

June 22nd Media and Online Social Networks

Questions:

Brainstorm a list of answers to this question:

1. How does the media (print, television, radio) perpetuate or dismantle racism?
2. Do the stories the media choose to report on reflect the issues and events going on in all communities?
3. How do community conversation on the web (online comments) and social media perpetuate or dismantle racism?

Desired Outcomes:

1. A list of ways racism is perpetuated or dismantled through media.
2. A list of ways media outlets can improve their reporting based on race.

3. A list of ways readers of online media and participants of online social media networks can dismantle racism.

June 29th Economic Development, Worcester Technical High School

Questions:

Brainstorm and discuss a list of answers to this question:

1. What are the perceptions of how economic development is furthering or not furthering people of color's needs? What are some stories to illustrate your perceptions?
2. What can residents, policymakers and business leaders do to help dismantle racism through economic development in our city?

Desired Outcomes:

1. A list of perceptions for how economic development is or is not furthering people of color's needs.
2. A list of ideas for how we can dismantle racism by working together for a more equitable local economy for all residents in the city.

On July 13th, 2015 a wrap up session was held at the DCU Center and some of the challenges and accomplishments that were shared about the dialogue sessions included:

- Logistics and physical space, creating a safe and respectful place for dialogue
- Nature of the questions
- Time for the discussions
- Size and composition of the small groups
- Facilitator/notetaker roles
- Media involvement

Overall there were a number of positive outcomes from the dialogue sessions that were shared:

- Some participants had an opportunity to talk about racism in a mixed racial setting for the first time.
- Some participants walked away with definitions and terminology related to racism that was completely new to them.
- Some participants used the opportunity to network and connect with like-minded people who are working on similar issues.

The compilation of the notes that were taken during the sessions were posted on the City of Worcester's website on July 15th and have remained available for the public to view and download.

The dialogues in many ways validated the initial strategy set out by the city manager. On September 15th, 2015 the city manager submitted an update to the city council regarding his progress on implementation of the initial strategy. The next progress report will be submitted to city council on January 26th, 2016.

Coalition next steps after the dialogues: identification of common themes from the compiled notes

Background

The Coalition was tasked with convening the dialogues and the question that was present before and after the dialogues was what will happen after the community comes together to talk? The city government is actively engaged in setting out to complete the initial strategy but what else needed to be done and how was this going to be conveyed to the public at large?

As a result of the dialogues a number of new community leaders joined the Coalition and a work plan was established. The subcommittee of the City Manager's Community Coalition Against Hate and Bias convened twice in November at Belmont AME Zion Church to review the compiled notes from the Dialogues on Race. The subcommittee was split into five groups, each with the notes from one of the following sessions: Representative government, Public safety, Youth and education, Media and online social networks and Economic development. Each group was asked to extract the five most frequently stated, ideals/ statements/ requests/ themes from the dialogue notes. The themes are listed in order of the frequency they were mentioned in the notes (from descending order of frequency). They were then tasked with comparing their list to the items addressed in the City Manager's September progress report to City Council to verify that the initial strategy was in tune with what participants discussed as concerns and solutions and to find out what was getting done on that list. The second part of the work plan set out to find out where the gaps were and what was needed from the rest of the community at large.

Dialogues top 35 themes, comments and critiques

(Highlights indicate what was addressed in the city manager's September progress report)

Representative Government

1. Elected officials don't work with diverse communities well
2. Limited representation on boards and commissions
3. Elected officials don't reach out to diverse communities, unless it is election season
4. Councilors at large – what is their role
 1. Narrow scope of Community
 2. Nepotism within the process – reaching out only to people they know – only reaching out to community when its election time
5. Lack of engagement and connecting with constituents in community
6. Employment in city government is not reflective of diverse
7. School system is limited regarding recruitment
8. City needs to do a better job in engaging and educating people in the process of voting
 - i. Only 50 students get into Worcester Rising Civic Camp – high achieving only

Public safety

9. Diversity Officer will need a specific plan and accountability
10. Police presence needs to collaborate with community organizations
11. Perception of racism and profiling
12. Community education is needed to address root causes for opiates, sexual exploitation, etc...
13. Training courses are needed to educate officers on proper de-escalation measures/ tactics
14. How do you address the internal culture of the police department?
15. Media portrays community of color in negative light

Education and Youth Engagement

16. There are alienating barriers for parents that need to be addressed
17. Diversity of faculty and administration
18. Criminalization of students of color behavior needs to be addressed
19. Address differences of access between have and have-nots, re: technology, language, opportunities, etc...
20. Better understanding via interactions between faculty, staff, students and parents (finding commonalities/ facilitating group activities)
21. Existing parenting groups could be more effective

Media and online social networks

22. Media sensationalizing negative stories in minority communities
23. Media bias against certain groups
24. Dehumanizes certain groups
25. Reporting cycles longer for negative stories in minority community
26. Public can't tell difference between actual news and opinion/ editorials
27. Body cameras/ other cameras will allow for more objective reporting
28. Someone needs to monitor and remove abusive and racist items on Worcester Police Department Facebook

Economic Development

29. There is not enough vocational training, qualification training, or employment opportunities Employment
30. More incubators needed for small businesses
31. Lack of transportation for training and work
32. Educators should connect businesses with schools for "real job training" and cultural competency
33. Too much white affirmative in leadership; there is a need for leadership in cultural communities
34. Dire need for transparency in opportunities and planning amongst leaders in community from City Manager and Chamber of Commerce
35. CM has good suggestions for youth and cultural groups but there needs to be better leadership development to have him better address Arabic speakers, Vietnamese, and other cultural communities

Overarching themes:

The common theme in four of the five sessions (Representative Government, Public Safety, Youth and Education and Economic Development) was the need to work to create a more diverse and culturally competent workforce.

The second largest overarching theme was that there is need to more effectively communicate to the public what the city government and other organizations in the city are and are not doing to address these themes. Providing information that confirms or refutes the statements is something that is clearly needed and how that information is or is not already communicated will need to be addressed. The Coalition has outlined some steps that can be taken towards that end below.

The dialogues pointed to specific concerns for future action by the city while raising concerns that the community at large needs to address.

The following actions have been taken by various city departments and highlight the priority from which the current administration is dealing with these concerns.

1. Created position of Chief Diversity Officer and hired a highly qualified candidate, Dr. Malika Carter.
2. Restructured and renamed the new city board, Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee
3. Reconstituted the Worcester Clergy Police Community Partnership
4. Reconvened the Clergy-Civilian Police Academy, which graduated its newest class in November 2015
5. Installed cameras in the WPD holding cell and two wagons, installed camera in a cruiser as a pilot program, and obtained and began testing a police body camera
6. Unveiled a Youth Violence Prevention Plan that includes 40 community partners and provides a road map to a long term strategy for reducing violence among our young people
7. Completed diversity training for City hiring managers and customer service staff that addressed cultural differences, unconscious bias and structural racism.
8. From April to September 2015 (six months) 11 of the 36 new hires, or 31%, were minorities. This represents an 18% increase of our workforce that is more inclusive and representative of our City.

Call for Community Initiatives

Community survey

Coalition members are currently completing a survey to better understand what other institutions are doing or plan to do that address these themes. A survey for the community (individuals and organizations) is under development and will be released this month.

Community meeting

Plan to attend a community meeting Monday February 29th to learn how the City of Worcester continues to fulfill its pledge, hear Coalition members share what they have

been doing, and watch as community leaders take the stage to pledge their action plan for the year to come. The meeting will be held from 6:30pm-8pm at the Belmont AME Zion church.

To stay in touch with our work and to receive the link to the community survey and hear about upcoming meetings and trainings please sign up to receive our newsletters/email: <http://goo.gl/21UE45> (Choose human rights trainings and events).

For more information about the City Manager's Community Coalition Against Bias and Hate Crimes please visit our website:

<http://www.worcesterma.gov/ocm/human-rights/coalition-against-bias-hate>