



Community policing: Alton chief meets with Missouri departments regarding better public relations

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FLORISSANT - Mentoring programs, body cameras, clergy interactions and the continuing St. Louis protests were all subjects of discussion at a Thursday meeting of the "Discussion and Solutions Committee."

The meetings are presided over by Rance Thomas, a professor emeritus of criminal justice and sociology at Lewis and Clark Community College and president of the North County Churches Uniting for Racial Harmony and Justice. Thomas is joined at these small gatherings at John Knox Presbyterian Church, a small building directly on the border of the communities of Florissant and Ferguson, by administration of local school districts, police departments, congregations and stakeholders of nearby communities. Of these groups, Alton is the only one represented from the Illinois side of the river.

This group has been meeting for approximately three years - around the time of the killing of Mike Brown by Officer Darren Wilson and the subsequent protests and riots. The group was not created for the sole purpose of being reactionary to crisis, however. The foundation of the group exists in its goals of being ahead of situations.

Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons has used several ideas created and shared within that group to help with community policing in Alton. Simmons said the "Summons of Joy" program done by officers during the Holiday Season was taken from departments in Missouri such as Hazelwood and Florissant, both of which had officers in attendance Thursday morning for its bimonthly meeting.

Fighting a Cultural War

While the current protests in St. Louis were addressed, they were not the cornerstone of the meeting. Representatives from both the Hazelwood and Florissant Police Departments confirmed they had assisted with the police response to the protests in St. Louis following the recent "not guilty" verdict of Jason Stockley, a St. Louis officer accused of using unnecessary lethal force against formerly convicted heroin dealer Anthony Lamar following a high speed chase in 2011, but none of the officers in attendance addressed the amount of alleged misconduct many protesters are accusing St. Louis Police of committing during the protest.

The rights of those protesters, however, were addressed by officers from both Hazelwood and Florissant, who discussed how they wanted the protests to "go smoothly" for everyone, adding they did not want issues with peaceful protesters and likewise expected those protesters to want the same of those officers.

Some mentions of those protests getting "ugly" with instances of window breaking did occur, but they were not the focal point of the meeting.

Instead, the meeting's main focus was directed at how police could become more positive figures in the community. Officers, as well as members of the clergy and school district, spoke of the effectiveness of current programs as well as the possible effectiveness of future ideas. The main ideal of the group was voiced by John Knox Presbyterian Church Pastor John Higgins when he referred to personal stories as "the cornerstone of culture" near the meeting's end.

"The fundamental issue is we are collectively in a two-front war right now," Higgins said. "There is a war of criminal justice and public safety in which law enforcement is tasked to protect civil rights, human beings and property. The other is a culture war. Who are, what are the police? What is their position in the community? Everyone has a different answer.

"Every community has its own culture. The building block of every culture is a story. Stories being absorbed are part of what goes wrong. It feeds into mistrust and fear. We need more abundant stories regarding positive interaction. The media and the justice system right now are affecting the stories and the way people think. That's part of the struggle for all of us.

"What brings us together is fighting that cultural war, so we're not at the mercy of every Tweet."

In order to fight that "cultural war," Higgins suggested police start creating more personal stories of good in the community to overcome the negative stories coming from other departments as well as the overall national attitude toward policing.

Pastor Monica Jefferson, the Senior Lead Pastor at St. Andrew's Church on Highway 67, said she is constantly being asked questions by members of her congregation regarding their safety around police. She said issues such as "driving while black" are brought to her by young African American men she said are genuinely concerned about police taking away their futures through abuse of power and even unlawful use of force. She said she does her best to address those issues, but added many of these young men are too frightened by what they see and hear from friends and family as well as social media and mainstream media to approach police.

Officers from the Hazelwood Police Department offered an invitation to any of these young men to their police station. The officers recognized some people "abuse the power and authority of badges and guns," which they said ultimately gives a bad reputation to the cops trying to do their jobs for the community - a number they assured vastly outnumbers the bad, at least in their department.

To become more familiar with police, the Hazelwood Police Department works closely with the Hazelwood School District in an effort to provide mentoring and education to students. A six-week program providing education of police work to students was implemented as well. Officers said as many as 20 students take part in the program, which educates them regarding the work of the police and even invites them to ask questions and partake in role-playing exercises. Officers said the classes are diverse with an equal number of male and female students becoming involved.

Recently, officers from the Hazelwood Police Department also spend time with elementary school students during lunch and recess hours. Students were apprehensive at first, but officers have said the children have since taken to the officers' presence and feel comfortable speaking candidly and asking several questions about their work.

Hazelwood School District Director of Communications and Marketing Kimberly G. McKenzie was on-hand. She discussed how police worked with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), school administration and students of the district to organize a peaceful protest following the Stockley verdict.

McKenzie said police worked with students in a way that made them happy and proud to flex their first amendment rights while realizing society inflicts consequences - be they positive and/or negative - on people exercising their rights. McKenzie said students were able to better understand their rights to protest and were taught their local police department existed to protect their rights as well as the rights of everyone else to do the same.



Community Engagement/Improving the Police Department

Since it was a hybrid meeting of several community leaders and police, Thomas encouraged both the police officers and members of the clergy on hand to work together toward community. He said police should be invited into churches and gatherings and clergy should be invited and encouraged to go on ride-alongs with their local departments. In fact, he expanded that to say any community stakeholder should apply to go on ride-alongs with their local departments to see what the job of their police looks like firsthand.

Simmons illustrated the Alton Police Department's commitment to this idea through a "Faith in Action" program, during which the department will be working with a local church to build a deck onto its building this weekend. Simmons said the Alton Police Department meets regularly with faith leaders to discuss improving the community.

Representatives from the Florissant and Hazelwood Departments discussed their "Summons of Joy" programs as well as some unsung items the departments do in partnership with their respective faith communities.

During the holiday season, each department works with faith leaders and school administrators to find families in need to supply with holiday meals and even gifts. Officers said when the community discovers what they are doing, they are met with an abundance of donations, but said these stories are often never told.

"These are the stories people don't read about," an officer from the Florissant Police Department said. "We don't do it to be known, and we don't want to push it out there too much, because a lot of these families receiving aid would like to remain anonymous."

He added his department helps a local food pantry unload a truck full of food every third Wednesday of the month when it arrives from the St. Louis Food Bank. Again, he said it was a story without much media coverage.

Thomas, however, said such deeds would be great for communities and their police departments regardless of media coverage. He said the lives changed by those actions would create the personal stories needed to change the overall opinions of how police conduct themselves within the community.

Another issue Thomas highlighted was recruitment of minority candidates to create a much more diverse police department to match a diverse community. While this is a massive issue for departments nationwide, Simmons said Alton had taken a massive step forward to help as recently as Wednesday night at the city council meeting.

"My city council just passed 'lateral entry' to our police department," Simmons said. "We're going to be coming to job fairs and schools and taking people from your side of the river."

The act, passed at the Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017, meeting declares the Alton Police Department can accept applications for lateral entry to the force from people who have been employed within the last three years as a police officer on a full-time basis for a minimum of 18 months. All applicants must have completed probationary requirements at their prior position as well. This will allow more police officers with experience from other departments to enter the Alton Police Department at roughly the same position.

Simmons said he hoped that legislation would help Alton recruit officers from around the region, including experienced minority officers.

Overall, officers in attendance from Hazelwood and Florissant as well as Chief Simmons from Alton were in concordance with the other non-police members of the meeting regarding the need to change the narrative of police perpetuated by both social and mainstream media.

The meeting concluded with a call to prayer for the police department as well as the faith groups and the safety of the protesters.

Body cameras were also discussed at the meeting, which will be featured on Riverbender.com as a more in-depth look at the challenges accompanying modern policing.