

Opinion

The Seattle Times

Take a seat at the table of Seattle community-police dialogues

June 14, 2023 at 3:26 pm



The Seattle Police Department's Jim Ritter, left, community outreach officer, meets with community members at Curry Temple CME Church before a meeting about hate crimes. (Alan Berner / The Seattle Times, 2016)

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Special to The Seattle Times

The current social climate around policing and community safety has led many in Seattle to ask, “Who is responsible for public safety?” and “What can the Seattle community do to address crime, fear and distrust?”

Inspired by these questions and a desire to find common ground between the community and police, the [Micro-Community Policing Plans \(MCP\)](#) initiative was developed. Now in its ninth year, the initiative is a collaboration between the Seattle Police Department and Seattle University’s Crime & Justice Research Center. The MCP comprises the annual Seattle Public Safety Survey, Community-Police Dialogues and a public-facing data dashboard, all of which are dedicated to collecting and sharing data on community perceptions of public safety in Seattle.

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The Community-Police Dialogues give Seattleites the opportunity to shape practical police reform in the Emerald City. Participants have been grappling with questions of accountability and exploring restorative, transformative, creative and holistic solutions to increase public safety and security in ways that recognize the unique needs of neighborhoods. Community participation is an investment that will pay dividends in the years to come.

The Seattle Police Department’s participation demonstrates [Chief Adrian Diaz’s stated commitment to understanding and meeting community needs](#). Police participants

include sworn and civilian personnel who provide resources and information. Attendees discuss Seattle Public Safety Survey results, real-time public safety concerns, evolving community needs and collaborative strategies to improve the neighborhood-level quality of life.

Community perceptions of public safety matter. Direct engagement between community members and police opens communication and builds relationships, creating a path toward meaningful change. The dialogues allow community members to learn about police-related resources, news and protocols.

As a community participant noted in 2022, “Having this sort of information helps us in the community understand the situation and what questions we should ask our City Council members to make the changes be more realistic.”

Through the dialogues, relationships between police and the community members help reduce the “us-versus-them” mentality. The meetings are beneficial for community members and police alike. SPD Officer Matthew Roberson explains, “The dialogues I have been a part of have been great for me personally as well as professionally. I have pushed my own comfort zone, seen others work together to build group cohesion and create a shared and safe space for vulnerability and real talk. ... Bringing humanity and the importance of individual impact into the room where all are equal and spend the majority of the time listening but have the same opportunity to speak.”

Community members have expressed the value of getting to know the officers who serve their neighborhoods. “I am not interested in talking to any policeman. I want my [neighborhood] policemen, not any officer. ... We want to talk with the person who would respond to [our] calls,” one community member said.

Officers frequently share their contact information with community members in the dialogues to continue the discussion. In 2021, a member of SPD assisted a community participant with the revitalization of block watch: “I can connect you with [Crime Prevention Coordinator] to start a block watch in South. Block watch gives an opportunity to meet with neighbors, talk about community concerns and community building.”

The value of the survey and dialogues depends on community involvement. Participation in the survey and the dialogues provides a way for community members to work with police to increase public safety and improve their neighborhood quality of life.

The MCPP research team, comprising Seattle University student research analysts, reaches out to the 58 Seattle micro-communities or neighborhoods through continuously expanding email lists, SPD collaborative policing contacts, local news broadcasts, social media outreach and attendance at community meetings to share the opportunity to participate. Community leaders, neighborhood-level organizers, religious groups, cultural ambassadors, students, educators, apartment managers, and local business, precinct and demographic advisory councils are among the many individuals and groups included in ongoing outreach. The research team also works to amplify younger voices in these discussions by facilitating a Restorative Community-Police Dialogue Circle practicum course for Seattle University students, now in its second year.

This effort is a long-term grassroots investment in Seattle's future that provides opportunities for every person who lives or works in Seattle to make positive change. If by coming to the dialogues one community member and one police officer leave with a view of each other as human and with new ideas on how to collaborate to improve public safety, we will be one step closer to true community policing that offers a [balanced and restorative approach to achieve community safety](#), bringing us closer to Mayor Bruce Harrell's vision of "One Seattle." Be that one community member and that one police officer who make up one community by taking a seat at the table and joining the discussion.

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