



El Paso County Sheriff's Office



February 2, 2021

To: Sheriff's Office Executive Staff

From: Bureau Chief Clif Northam

Re: Report to Exec. Staff - Community Conversations Session #1, January 25, 2021

On Monday evening, January 25, 2021 from 6:00pm to 8:00pm the Sheriff's Office held it's first 2021 Session of the Community Conversations Project. The Session was held utilizing the Zoom Virtual Meeting platform.

Planning for this project began in September of 2020, with the assistance of a local consulting business who provides advice and direction on improving community and law enforcement relationships through community listening sessions. This business previously assisted with the Colorado Springs Police Department's Illumination Project held in 2017.

Under the consultant's guidance, the Bureau of Professional Responsibility, led by Bureau Chief Clif Northam, and primarily aided by Public Information Office Manager Jacqueline Reed and Public Information Office Sergeant, Deb Mynatt, established a team of racially and ethnically diverse community members. Additionally, a team of El Paso County Sheriff's Office employee volunteers were chosen to be the Project Planning Team to plan for a January 2021 initiation of the Community Conversations Project.

The January 25, 2021 session of Community Conversations was attended by approximately 20 community members. There were eight EPSO employee volunteers who participated. After introductions of Command Staff members, the community members and EPSO volunteers were placed into four breakout rooms by our program consultant. Our intent was to have four or five community members and two Sheriff's Office employees in each breakout room. Each breakout room had a facilitator assigned who would give the prompts for the discussions and keep the conversations moving along, assuring that the conversations were open and honest, yet conducted with respect. The facilitators were chosen based on their leadership and facilitations skills demonstrated in the community, and their suitability as determined by our program consultant.

Each group was given approximately an hour and a half for discussion. At the end of the hour and a half discussion in the breakout groups, the consultant brought the whole group back together for a quick debrief of the discussions based on the notes taken by the facilitators in each breakout room. From the complete notes, the consultant, highlighted some of the more salient points of the discussions.



Office of the Sheriff

27 East Vermijo Ave. • Colorado Springs, CO 80903
719-520-7100

www.epcsheriffsoffice.com

Criminal Justice Center

2739 E. Las Vegas St. • Colorado Springs, CO 80906
719-390-2000

Breakout Group #1:

1. Community involvement and more contact with law enforcement creates better relationships between law enforcement and community members.
2. There is a disconnect in communication that needs to be addressed to rebuild relationships.
3. The Sheriff's Office needs to do a better job of hiring minority members of the community so it can look more like the community.
4. It is important that law enforcement be educated about cultural differences.

Breakout Group #2:

1. There is more trust in EPSO than in law enforcement in general.
2. Some of the members of this group have had positive experiences with EPSO and respect and support our office.
3. To build greater trust law enforcement needs to do better at reaching out to kids as well as adults
4. Law enforcement agencies in this community need to have a cohesive and consistent message to build trust across the board. Many community members feel the EPSO is more trustworthy than law enforcement in general.
5. There is a perception EPSO treats inmates worse than the non-incarcerated public.

Breakout Group #3:

1. It is imperative that community groups be able to connect with the Sheriff's Office.
2. EPSO needs to do more to engage communities of color; communities of color need to experience freedom without stereotypes and the influence of implicit bias and structural racism.
3. EPSO does not reflect women and minorities in high numbers because the process of joining law enforcement is challenging and may discourage women and people of color.
4. The key to impactful community conversations is the elimination of fear within communities impacted by imbedded structural racism.

Breakout Group #4:

1. Media is a factor in whether we are seen in a more negative or positive light by the community.
2. Personal experience is also a factor; negative experience equals negative perceptions.
3. People in the group were able to realize they had a personal bias.
4. It is important for law enforcement officers to know the historical implications of policing and minority communities.
5. Law enforcement officers feel frustrated that even with all the training they receive and their best efforts there is still a lack of trust.

There are many more points of interest that can be read in the full notes taken by the facilitators, which I will make available by email attachment for your review.

Lessons Learned from the First Session:

We had RSVPs from community members from all over the County as well as citizens who reside within the incorporated areas of Colorado Springs. For future sessions we will request those interested in participating to include in their RSVP where they live and work. We will give priority to those who live in the area of the county we are targeting for that session and fill in with others if there is space.

Particularly in a virtual environment where there are no private conversations, we need to be sensitive to comments made before the session starts. We do not know where people are regarding their law enforcement experiences and we do not want to reinforce negative experiences some might have had. Conversation should be kept at the “nice weather we’re having” level.

We will send a photo board of Command Staff members with our response to the RSVPs and the Zoom link to aid citizens in identifying Staff members while Sheriff Elder introduces them. Sheriff Elder will only need to introduce his Command Staff members. They will respond with a “hello” and a wave only. The EPSO employee volunteers will introduce themselves once they are in the breakout rooms.

We will ensure before each session that the EPSO volunteers have a brief training about expectations and cautions during the breakout sessions. Additionally, all EPSO employees should remember they are representing the Office in a sense but also, they are citizens of the community. They are not in this to be “law and order” during the discussions but rather to have a conversation and start building relationships.

While conducting these sessions virtually, we will keep the number of community members to 20, with 8 to 10 EPSO employee volunteers, thereby keeping the ratios of four breakout groups, containing five community members and two EPSO members. This is more manageable in an online environment than the original target of 40 community members. When we can do in-person sessions, we will seek a larger number of people if feasible.

Several of the community members found out about this effort through their neighborhood watch groups. This was due to the efforts of Crime Prevention Coordinator Brent Ambuehl primarily. He is a great resource to help us target specific areas of the county.

We also learned that our community needs better education and information about the differences between EPSO and CSPD. Several of the participants did not realize there was a difference.

Next Steps in Response:

Based on the discussions from this Community Conversations session and subsequent discussions, the leadership team intends to update the Office's public facing web page to include the number of community members participating, highlights from each session, lessons learned and proposed or possible responses to citizen's concerns, questions and suggestions. We intend to begin creating short roll-call presentations for our employees discussing citizens' concerns and educating our employees more on issues of diversity, anti-bias and anti-racism, historical perspectives regarding law enforcement and communities of color, etc. We will keep our employees updated in this way about what things are primarily on the minds of the community members who attend the Community Conversations sessions, while at the same time recruiting for a larger cadre of employee volunteers for future sessions. We will consider creating social media information that more clearly identifies the differences between the Sheriff's Office and the Colorado Springs Police Department. We will also be able to recruit for our future Citizens Engagement Programs (CEP) from the participants of the Community Conversations. At the end of each Community Conversations session we will invite the participants who want to engage further and learn more about our agency to consider joining us for a CEP and an opportunity to become a part of our Community Advisory Board or one of the sub-committees, thereby helping us to turn their suggestions and ideas into concrete action.

Suggestions from the Community Conversations, and actions that the Sheriff's Office takes regarding those suggestions, will be posted on the external facing Community Conversations webpage and will be distributed to participants in the Community Conversations via email.

The next Community Conversations session will be held on Tuesday, February 23, 2021, from 1800 to 2000 hrs. The target area will be the Cimarron Hills Community; however, this will still be held virtually over Zoom.