

**Minutes**  
**Allegany County Sheriff's Office Police Reform Public Forum**  
February 25, 2021  
Zoom

**Committee Members Present** – County Administrator Carissa Knapp; Sheriff Rick Whitney; Legislator Mike Healy; Legislator John Ricci; Public Defender Barb Kelley; District Attorney Keith Slep; Director of Community Services Dr. Robert Anderson; Pastor Marc Chamberlain; Jail Administrator Chris Ivers; Deputy Sheriff Andrew Bigelow; County Attorney Jeff Donigan; Assistant Director of Community Services Lindy White; County Personnel Director Bobby Budinger; Genesee Valley Central School Superintendent Brian Schmitt

**Others Present** – Assistant Director of Economic Development & Planning Michelle Denhoff; Director of Planning Kier Dirlam

**Review of Public Responses from Survey**

Administrator Knapp stated that the questions in the survey provided to the public were formulated based on the requirements of the executive order. The power point presented during the public forum is available on the website for reference. She noted that most police reform requirements are tailored to larger communities with more of a police presence, rather than a focus on jail administration and civil duties, like the Allegany County Sheriff's Office. People were more interested in community outreach rather than reform of policies.

B. Kelley asked if there are different policies based on jail administration vs public policing or if they were the same, an example was Use of Force. Sheriff Whitney responded that the reform is based on public policing only, but that the jail policies are similar. Administrator Knapp stated that policies are being reviewed to see if they need to be tailored further. It is possible that it could be an annual event, like Shared Services, and it is likely they are looking for a timeline of policy review, not that all policies were reviewed at once. Part of the plan moving forward will be to determine if the policies in place need more work.

M. Denhoff was asked to present a summary of the survey responses to the group, as follows:

- List of the committee members presented to the group, identified by Administrator Knapp.
- 85% of respondents felt that the Sheriff's Office deployment practice or policing strategy did not demonstrate any racial bias.
- 86% of respondents felt that the Sheriff's Office deployment practice or policing strategy did not result in unfair, disproportionate policing of communities of color.
- When asked if there were other problems with the deployment practice, a variety of comments were given. However, they related to things from more road patrol, to the Sheriff's Office being over or under staffed, and also mentioned additional policing in Alfred by the Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff responded that in the policing statistics specific to the Sheriff's Office, there are not many people of color arrested.

- 51% of respondents felt that there is just the right number of deputies on staff, while 29% felt there are not enough, and 20% felt there are too many.
- Respondents were asked about the Use of Force Policy and the OC Spray Policy currently in place. More than half of the responses stated they had no comment or that they should continue as is if it meets best practice. Policies are available for review on the website.
- Suggested additional steps to give people confidence that the Sheriff's Office treats all citizens equally and fairly were presented. A couple that were pointed out are body cams for deputies, hiring more officers of color, and more use of mental health services.
- Suggestions to assure citizens that the Sheriff's Office is free of bias in their actions were body cams, transparency in training, continuing education, creating an advisory board with members of the public or agency advocates that work with people in need were some of the items identified.
- Input related to the Sheriff's Office de-escalation policy was minimal. Sheriff Whitney identified that responses that were provided were not specific to us, but were for other policing agencies outside of our control, or mentioned actions that took place in large cities. M. Denhoff agreed stating that many responses seemed to be non-specific.
- 49% of respondents said no when asked if they felt the Sheriff's Office participation in release of non-sentenced inmates, as well as the Alternates to Incarceration Program is beneficial. It was discussed that the question may have been confusing or too open-ended and may have been misinterpreted. 27% said yes, and 24% said maybe.
- Moving on to environmental design and crime deterring environmental design issues, most stated that it should be the businesses responsibility, a community effort, or could be done by an outside reviewing agency.
- Suggestions on strategies to reduce violence that could be implemented by the Sheriff's Office were provided on a slide and included an increased road patrol, combating drug trade, mental health training. Bail reform was also mentioned as a hinderance to violence reduction.
- Survey responses for what services are beneficial and which are not, that the Sheriff's Office provides were not available for the presentation of results, but was provided in the table of results prior to the meeting.
- When asked what other services would be beneficial that are currently not offered some responses were a road patrol, mental health crisis teams, rehabilitation options, online pistol permitting, and self-defense classes.
- Suggestions for improved policing in your community were related to patrols in school zones, drug enforcement, mental health resources, and a transitional halfway house to support safe community transition.
- Other suggestions offered to create more transparency and accountability within the Sheriff's Office were body cams, transmitting information to the public, assigning more deputies to each town, creating additional events in the communities to provide more outreach to children.
- Demographics were as follows:
  - 83% had an interaction within the last five years with the sheriff's office
  - Reasons included civil matters, office security, law enforcement, pistol permitting/licensing, professional, or fire service
  - Ages varied, 36% were over 55, 3% preferred not to say, leaving 61% between 25-54
  - 93% were White/Caucasian with most respondents earning \$50,000 or higher

annually.

## **Reform Discussion**

Administrator Knapp told members that they should have received all the policies under review and where they could find them on the website. The members then went through the process of plan development and content.

There was discussion related to better transparency and how to disseminate that information. The annual reports are provided on the website in several locations with a lot of detail provided on what the Sheriff's Office does and the programs managed at the jail. Information related to the reform process has already been added to the website, so that is one step in the right direction.

**Deployment** – There was discussion regarding road patrol and what that actually means to the public. Administrator Knapp went through an extensive list of current deployments and noted that more were identified in the public forum, but that there are several policing agencies in the county and it's easy to confuse them. Sheriff Whitney stated that people might assume a Sheriff's car is on road patrol in their communities, even though they are likely dealing with civil matters, or could be transporting prisoners. M. Denhoff mentioned that in this discussion there could be recommendations for additional staff related to new programs, like a road patrol. Sheriff stated that it's always been a bone of contention with further discussion among the group. It was suggested to reach out to community members again to determine why they felt the need for a road patrol, related to problems, or ask what they felt having an additional patrol would accomplish. There might be underlying issues that could be addressed by other programs already in place, or by other agencies. The cost is significant, it would require training, additional employees, liability.

School resource officers were also discussed related to road patrol officers, it is unclear on what the actual response would be. Implementation of the education component was also discussed here with B. Schmitt, related to building that visibility, community relationship and a better partner to the schools. B. Kelley also mentioned hesitancy regarding survey responses from 41 people. M. Denhoff offered examples of how else to reach out to other groups like the Superintendents related to the partnership and education component.

**Use of Force** – There is a use of force policy that is mostly related to jail administration. Looking at the policy, it should be determined moving forward if it is up to date and covers other deployment activities. Sheriff Whitney stated that the Division of Criminal Justice Services certified them for the Use of Force policy. B. Budinger asked about psychological examinations of deputies and how that is currently done. Sheriff Whitney responded that they are currently done in house. M. Healy verified that it's done as part of their criminal background check. Any deputies are promoted in house and go through the NYS police trainings. No further discussion related to use of force.

**Procedural Justice and Bias** – There is a policy under review right now, but it hasn't been approved yet. Trainings provided now include Title VI Discrimination, Sensitivity Awareness, Sexual Harassment, Workplace Violence, Diversity Awareness. B. Schmitt asked how the new policy would be communicated to the public – Administrator Knapp stated she felt that the County as a whole struggled with this. Specific to this, a permanent website and possible hard copy location

will be made available. B. Schmitt said that the school has this in place and it helps with transparency. Any additional trainings will be added as needed. They are reviewed on a regular basis for consideration.

**De-escalation** – Officers are trained at the academy. The Sheriff's Office doesn't offer it currently, but would consider adding it.

**Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion** – The Sheriff stated there isn't a lot of law enforcement related diversion, it is related more the jail. B. Kelley offered a suggestion about creating a mental health team for response to those who are in mental health crises. She offered an example of her experiences. Administrator Knapp said this is the perfect time to talk about it. Dr. Anderson said that the program is already in place but people don't know where to go to access the services. An outreach team from Elmira Psychiatric Center is in the area as well. Most of the program access is done through the Clarity hotline, Wellsville PD or State Police. There was further discussion on "941", and issues that arise. The Sheriff stated that they do all they can to help people once they are in the jail, but it isn't easy. Dr. Anderson said that on a call the other day he heard the statistic that 85% of inmates in local jails have a behavioral health problem. He said that it takes a lot of effort to place those who truly need it into a help center. L. White stated that the law also states that people have a right to be as mentally ill as they wish, leaving families to care for them, until they no longer can and the police are called. B. Kelley asked who they can call for mental health response – L. White stated there is a hotline they can call or to call the Community services office directly. M. Healy said that one of the challenges to this is getting the person to acknowledge they have a problem. Pastor asked about statistic in the Sheriff's Office. There are very few 941 referrals done in the Sheriff's response, most are done by other policing agencies.

An educational component was also mentioned, with trainings to be provided in house and making this information more available to the public. Information is available at the 911 center for officers to access if needed. Dr. Anderson mentioned in over 50 years, the biggest problem has been the bias against mental health, from the whole community. No one wants to admit when help is needed but it has gotten better.

**Restorative Justice** – This was defined as the response to crime by organizing a meeting between the offender and the victim to repair harm. The Sheriff's Office is involved in the STOP-DWI Victim's Impact Panels and Alternatives to Incarceration program with victims and offenders sharing their experiences, but it is difficult to find someone that wants to openly share. L. White indicated that the Village of Alfred had tried to do a restorative justice program in the past but it was unsuccessful because parties weren't comfortable discussing their stories openly. B. Kelley thought that the program should take place post-conviction, and post sentence but didn't feel like it was feasible to implement a new program at this time. Sheriff Whitney stated that his office only does approximately 200 arrests a year and they are not serious offenses (warrant arrests were not included in this number).

There was discussion regarding NYS Sheriff's meeting, held weekly, related to how often reviews were already taking place, and that not all of these items will be applicable or require change.

**Community Based Outreach and Conflict Resolution** – There is a robust list of community outreach efforts already done. Many outreach efforts are done in coordination with schools, including programs like Read Across America, are still being done. M. Healy asked the Sheriff if Deputies are still stopping at schools on a regular basis? Sheriff replied that there isn't a schedule but deputies are encouraged to stop at the different schools. PR and education could be better utilized to create an awareness factor of all the items that take place.

**Problem Oriented Policing and Hot Spot Policing** – The Sheriff's Office does take part in problem policing, when complaints are received. Civil deputies might be sent out, or the speed trailers will be placed.

**Focused Deterrence** – Crime reduction strategies to deter crimes like camp burglaries or vehicle thefts. To help combat this the Sheriff's Office tries to do press releases related to this, reminding residents to lock homes and vehicles. Administrator Knapp asked if scams were a similar situation. Sheriff Whitney said yes, they also try to do press releases for items like that as they arise, in addition to presentations to community members that participate in the TRIAD program at the Sheriff's Office. The idea of press releases related to these items should continue, as well as other possible ways to educate people, on an as needed basis to help with focused deterrence.

**Crime Prevention through Environmental Design** – In relation to poor lighting and shrubbery at entrances that could invite crime. Without an active road patrol monitoring business, it is unclear how the Sheriff's Office could assist with this particular item. Sheriff Whitney explained that they do participate and offer businesses an Active Shooter Program, where the business is analyzed for safety and offered suggestions to reduce crime attempts by making updates to their layouts. Pastor Chamberlain noted that the Sheriff came to his church providing this service and it was very helpful. M. Healy asked if the community would benefit from offering seminars or group trainings on how to identify these items. The Sheriff felt that a one on one approach at the place of business or home would be more effective.

**Violence Prevention and Reduction Interventions** – The Sheriff said that their office is a member of Partners for Prevention in Allegany County and there is a program offered at the jail, called 3-R for domestic violence offenders helping to recognize and reduce those behaviors (it has been very effective). That program has been on hiatus due to COVID, but it is being considered for online implementation so that it can continue. The collaboration efforts should continue, and if more programs are available the Sheriff's Office would consider becoming member and participating in those as a partner.

**Model Policies Promulgated by the Municipal Police Training Council** – Sheriff Whitney said that he feels all of the current policies either follow a model policy provided by the MPTC or that they've received from another agency that has the same policy in place. Policies should be offered in an easy to find place, permanently available on the website and in a hard copy library for those individuals that don't have access to the internet.

**Agency Accreditation Standards** – The Sheriff's Office is working on the Law Enforcement Accreditation through the State Sheriff's Association; however, it is a slow process. The lack of a road patrol hinders the process slightly, as much of the standards are applicable to that.

## **Close of Meeting**

Administrator Knapp ended with a note that the items just discussed will be going into the plan for submission to New York State with items that the Sheriff's Office will be working on through the reform process. B. Budinger also offered that with the transparency discussion, the Sheriff's Office, in addition to the Annual Reports, provides a very detailed monthly report that presents statistics and summaries of accomplishments through each month. With a lack of media outlets in Allegany County, we should consider housing the monthly and annual reports in one place for easier access.

There was further discussion on how those reports could be publicly presented during board meetings while live streaming, whether it would be a link or just showing on the screen. It was suggested that noting where they are available on the website prior to meeting start would be helpful. Administrator Knapp mentioned that there is software that could allow for an easier transition into this type of thing. The software should be in full use within the next couple years. It will take extensive training to complete.

M. Denhoff provided an update of the timeline for approval of the document.

- The draft plan will be made available March 3, presented to the Legislators for review and made available for public comments.
- Comments will be accepted through March 17 and incorporated into the plan, as appropriate.
- Submission to New York State will occur March 26 to meet the April 1 deadline.
- It will also have to be approved at the Board of Legislators meeting March 22, by resolution.

Administrator Knapp thanks committee members and staff for their efforts in the process, and noted that most of the work was done outside of the meetings, reviewing policies presented.

The meeting was concluded at approximately 4:30 pm.

Minutes respectfully provided by Michelle Denhoff.  
Allegany County Office of Planning