

**City of Takoma Park**  
**Reimagining Public Safety Task Force**  
**4.13.2021 Meeting Summary**

**High-Level Overview:**

The events of the past week were reviewed: the shooting in Takoma Park involving an off-duty Pentagon Police officer; Maryland becoming the first state to repeal the Law Enforcement Bill of Rights; video of a police officer using pepper spray on a US military member during a traffic stop in Virginia; and the shooting of an unarmed black man in a Minnesota suburb. The work of public safety – with all the nuance that even that term (public safety) needs – is as important as ever, and the work of this Public Safety Task Force remains vital.

Mayor Stewart spoke with the Task Force to acknowledge what has taken place the Takoma Park community and the plan to meet with and provide support to residents of the area tonight. Events around the country re-confirm importance of work the Task Force is doing. The Mayor noted that the work takes a toll and thanked the Task Force members for their service. The Mayor and the City Council are looking forward to recommendations of the Task Force for appropriate policies and programs to be put in place to make needed changes.

Councilmember Searcy echoed the Mayor's sentiments of appreciation to the Task Force. Councilmember Searcy said her heart goes out to the families of the victims and to Takoma Overlook residents. Councilmember Searcy emphasized how important it is that the Task Force members are here and that the members are the right people for this time, with the expertise, compassion, and understanding so critical to the work. Councilmember Searcy encouraged the members to think about a holistic approach to public safety and cited recent challenges in dealing with issues of mental illness and vigilantism. Councilmember Searcy asked members to think about public safety as a whole and develop recommendations within the framework of what the city can do to help. Councilmember Searcy repeated her thanks and assurance of support.

The floor was opened for reflections and comments from Task Force members. Members revisited their requests for budget information, city agency communications policies and procedures, guidance around communicating between meetings, and to hear from subject matter experts related to the work of the subcommittees. During tonight's subcommittee meetings, members had the opportunity to delineate who they wanted to hear from on what topics, and to request additional information.

**Review of Timeline**

The Task Force timeline was reviewed. It was noted that the process began in January with a community meeting. February was spent collecting applications and doing stakeholder audits and focus groups. A rotating schedule of Task Force and subcommittee meetings was set. This is the fifth meeting and there is much to do which means the Task Force and subcommittees will be moving aggressively. There are two upcoming community meetings, the first will be a listening session for the Task Force to get feedback from the broader community. The second one in late May will be a chance to seek feedback on draft recommendations.

## **Subcommittees**

In the intervening week, Task Force members had the opportunity to review the subcommittees' areas of focus and indicate their choices for participation. The proposed subcommittee assignments and their facilitators were announced. All Task Force members were paired up with their first or second choice subcommittee. The Task Force meeting ended and the subcommittees met to begin their work. A report from each subcommittee follows the list of committee members. Asterisked and bolded committee member names indicate citizen leads.

### **Community Quality of Life**

*This subcommittee will consider the intersection of public safety and quality of life issues, including housing, mental health, and more, as well as the implications for Takoma Park programs, policies, and budget.*

**Facilitator:** Jevin D. Hodge

**Committee Members:**

- § **Sawa Kamara\***
- § Duane Scott
- § Ajmel Quereshi
- § Emil Parker
- § Christina Morado

## **General Considerations**

The subcommittee began by considering a search for solutions with a holistic approach and how to think about developing recommendations for the city. Through the widest lens, the residents of Takoma Park want to feel safe and not feel the need to take the law into their own hands. Public safety and quality of life are broad principles. The subcommittee's goal is to start from those recurring themes and arrive at recommendations for action items that, 1) reflect the journey from

where the community has been to where the community wants to go; and 2) acknowledge what works and what doesn't and what to do about that. The subcommittee focused on programmatic reform, budget allocations, community oversight of law enforcement agencies, and community coordination.

The subcommittee would like to hear from non-government entities working in the Takoma Park community. These organizations may provide valuable perspectives on how city policies, procedures and processes are understood by residents, and how the city's best efforts at reaching all residents with timely communication are received. Members of the subcommittee understand that within each Ward residents are not fully aware of all that is going on within their community.

In regard to housing, the threat of becoming unhoused is real and can be imminent for some residents. The availability and quality of housing varies from ward to ward and the subcommittee would like to hear from Grayce Wiggins of Housing and Community Development. Information on the agency's current initiatives may inform the committee's recommendations.

Quality of life and public safety interact very publicly when people experiencing mental health crises evidence those crises in the public square. The committee would like to hear from city agencies regarding resources dedicated to responding appropriately and effectively to these challenges. Having an understanding of current programs and services may inform the committee's recommendations, such as a resource guide on city mental health resources for residents and community partners as a whole.

Subcommittee members acknowledge that feeling safe in the city is subjective and depends heavily on personal and social context. In order to develop practical recommendations that will successfully navigate the intersection of quality of life and public safety, including moving some functions away from the police, the subcommittee would like to hear more specifically from the Takoma Park Police Department on the scope of the department's authority, the limits of the department's enforcement capabilities, and the department's own perspective on what its members are called upon to do each day.

The Subcommittee would like to be sure they are making best use of their time together in these meetings by being clear ahead on what will be discussed, having a way to ask questions between meetings, and having specific action-items or "homework" between meetings. (Note: this request was shared by all three subcommittees.)

**Further Information/Research/Data Needed:**

The subcommittee identified areas they wish to explore further and specific items of information including data, policies, procedures and processes. The areas for further exploration are: 1) current city budget and staff; 2) current city programs and services dedicated to responding to mental health concerns; and 3) more detailed understanding of the role and responsibilities of the police, their preparation for policing in Takoma Park, and their ongoing training for an evolving community.

The specific requests are listed below:

- List of paid and unpaid positions within the City.
- Assess opportunity to establish a civic commission and community resource coordinators to increase communication across all stakeholder groups

### **Alternatives, Methods, and Responses**

*This subcommittee will assess Takoma Park's current policing practices for emergency and non-emergency calls, including calls related to mental health. Also, this subcommittee will compare and contrast new potential approaches and best practices that may apply to Takoma Park.*

**Facilitator:** Cordell Carter II

**Committee Members:**

§ Michael Rubin

§ Jide Atoyebi

§ Sadie Cheston-Harris

§ Cedric Boatman

§ Xitlalli Velasquez

### **General Considerations**

The subcommittee considered what cities would likely be peer cities to Takoma Park. Such cities may have piloted and/or established alternative programs to policing. The successes and lessons learned from those efforts can be helpful as this subcommittee considers relevant and valid metrics for recommending alternative methods to policing for Takoma Park. One program mentioned in particular was the CAHOOTS program. CAHOOTS is a mental health crisis intervention program in Eugene, Oregon. Since 1989 they have responded to Eugene's non-violent mental health 911 calls.

The subcommittee would like to hear from neighboring jurisdictions – Montgomery and Prince George's Counties in particular – regarding their dispatch operations. Caroline Sturgis, Assistant

Chief Administrator, Montgomery County, and the Montgomery County Director of Communications were mentioned in particular. How 911 calls are processed and the protocol for deciding who or what kind of actions are deployed depending on the scenario, and what is offered as far as mental health/ alternative resources for non-emergency situations, may inform the subcommittee's recommendations. The subcommittee would also like to hear from a representative of DC's MPD race and policing training programs.

The subcommittee would like more information on the 2-1-1 Virginia, a program of the Virginia Department of Social Services, which provides information and referral for a variety of services including physical and mental health resources. The program's metrics of use and success may inform the subcommittee's recommendations.

### **Further Information/Research/Data Needed:**

The subcommittee identified areas they wish to explore further and specific items of information including data, policies, procedures and processes. The areas for further exploration are: 1) Takoma Park 911 dispatch; 2) Takoma Park Police Department; and 3) jurisdiction.

The specific requests are listed below.

#### Takoma Park 911 Dispatch Questions:

- We need a better baseline of what the current processes are (the 911 calls/dispatch etc.) before we can think about changes/improvements. What are the current processes for responding to various emergencies?
- How are people trained in 911 call centers and how are various calls handled? What options do operators have for offering solutions to various 911 calls?
- What is the volume of calls to TP 911 operators? Can we break down the data by the race of the callers? Do we have data on the kinds of calls people are making? For example, are there white residents calling the police for "suspicious behavior"?

#### Takoma Park Police Department Questions:

- Why is there such a range of what a police officer could be called in for? Where could some of those more minor responsibilities be delegated to others who are more specialized?
- What are police officers being tasked with (their actual job description)?
- Can we see a breakdown of what officers are supposed to do on a given day vs. what they actually have to do on a given day?
- We are curious about our force size. The chief said interactions with police were significantly decreased but their force size was not decreased. Are there staffing/funds

that could be moved to other positions/ support programs? What ratios are driving budget decisions?

- Can we look at the data around people who perpetrate non-violent or violent crimes in TP and see what percentage of them were residents vs. non-residents of TP?
- What kinds of testing and training do new recruits and seasoned officers go through? (Implicit bias testing, psychological testing, de-escalation training, cultural training, etc.) How do you assess someone's beliefs/ background prior to becoming a police officer? How do you assess someone who is regularly policing Black communities but actually never grew up or lived around a Black community? At that point, their only interaction with the Black community is in a negative capacity/ only being called in during an emergency response.

#### Jurisdiction Questions:

- We need to think about how processes work especially since TP is a bit different with regards to city/county jurisdiction. We're on the line of DC which also affects jurisdiction questions. Where do the various jurisdictions overlap, compete or coexist? How does this impact other departments as well? (Fire department vs. police department etc.)
- How are the jurisdiction issues affecting dispatch operators?

#### **Community Engagement and Transparency**

*This subcommittee will evaluate practices and policies related to sharing data and budget information among the public as well as efforts to engage community partners in public safety efforts. Additionally, this subcommittee will review existing efforts and consider new approaches to recruiting and retaining public safety professionals.*

**Facilitator:** Jamal Holtz

**Committee Members:**

§ **Lauren Van Tol\***

§ Adam Braskich

§ Jumana Musa

§ Kiminori Nakamura

#### **General Considerations**

The subcommittee considered community engagement and transparency in Takoma Park, as they relate to the broad range of communication opportunities and challenges in the diverse city that is Takoma Park. Communication at its heart is education – with the goal of impacting behavior in pursuit of a more equitable, livable, safer city. But communication is a feedback loop, and as the subcommittee looks at communication through a race equity lens, the ongoing concern is that communication from the city to its residents is timely, accurate, consistent, culturally sensitive,

and makes use of trusted sources. Multiple entry points that enable residents to communicate their concerns to the city encourage engagement are good ways to learn what people are thinking about.

The point was made the Task Force itself, while diverse along some dimensions, raised issues of equity and access. Each component – virtual meetings, digital resources, all communications in English, and the time of meetings – has the potential to exclude people who did not have those skills or capabilities. The broader point is what avenues are used to provide information to residents and how are the messages reinforced. Unless residents understand what is expected of them and why, there will continue to be a mismatch between expectations and actuality on both sides, the city, and its residents.

The subcommittee considers that full transparency regarding TPPD recruitment and onboarding processes, ongoing training, enforcement capabilities, and accountability is key to engaging the community in public safety efforts. The justification for traffic stops continues to be a focus for concern, and here again not knowing the “rules,” e.g., window tint percentage, a hangtag on the rearview mirror, can be problematic. The city alert system can play a role in engaging residents with timely, comprehensive updates as well.

The subcommittee would like more information and would like to hear from the city Communications Department. After a high-profile event, the subcommittee would like to know how decisions are made on what is said, how quickly, and how often updated. The balance between transparency and a process that protects confidentiality is a difficult one to maintain. Often the most trusted communicators are sidelined in favor of officials, contributing to skepticism among listeners.

As the subcommittee’s work goes forward, the members would like to be able to share information informally among themselves and with the other members of the Task Force between weekly meetings. A slack channel or access to shared folders would facilitate this.

Subcommittee members also note that they are being contacted by residents about the Task Force; the use of the public comment form and regular reporting on its use and content is another avenue for residents to communicate their concerns.

The subcommittee is working toward recommendations that will drive community engagement through an understanding of the City of Takoma Park's priorities and operations, and promote confidence in the policies, procedures, and processes which reflect those priorities and operations.

**Further Information/Research/Data Needed:**

The subcommittee identified areas they wish to explore further and specific items of information including data, policies, procedures, and processes. The areas for further exploration are: 1) TPPD body camera data; 2) TPPD traffic stops; and 3) city agencies.

The specific requests are listed below:

TPPD Body Camera Data

- Timeliness of release of footage to the public
- Officers view footage before writing a report

TPPD traffic stops

- Communication on policies, procedures, and practices
- Breakdown of Race
- Justification on stops
- Outcomes

City Agencies

- Overview of communication structure/chain of command
- Navigation of city website