



**FIGHTING TO UNDERSTAND**  
COMPLEX TOPICS WITH FELLOW AMERICANS

# AKRON AREA RESIDENTS DEVISE A PLAN TO BUILD TRUST WITH POLICE

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*REPORT ON THE WORK OF AKRON AREA CITIZENS AS THEY CONTINUED A SERIES OF CONVERSATIONS ON THE ISSUE OF TRUST BETWEEN THE PEOPLE AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, DESIGNED AND FACILITATED BY FIGHTING TO UNDERSTAND, HELD AUGUST 19, 2023 AT ST. GEORGE CHURCH, FAIRLAWN.*

By Doug Oplinger  
Ted Wetzel, Executive Director

About 40 people ventured out on a stormy night in August to deal with the biggest issue in Akron: Safety of the people.

Thinking about what is required to feel safe and secure, they discussed what needs to change, who needs to change and how we can begin to trust the police, the judges, the prosecutors and each other.

The outcome of this third and final meeting that involved more than 100 people over time was nothing less than stunning – with an occasional flash of lightning through the windows for emphasis – as it became evident that when people embrace complexity, when they listen and reason together, solutions emerge, people take ownership and change happens.

Many lingered after the event to chat. There is solid evidence that people returned home with a sense of purpose. Some engaged in the community in new ways. Word spread that people – including police officers – saw potential to solve one of Akron's most troubling and divisive issues through more dialogue like this one.

There was a sense of hope.

But as this report was prepared, a political candidate in Ohio posted a divisive Tweet about national calls to defund the police. It was an oversimplified and misleading talking point that was more likely to create animosity and dash hope than it was to create hope.

How do we deal with this?

The people of the Akron area illustrated in this series of community dialogues that there is a universal desire to improve life and provide hope – even in the midst of others who want to divide us.

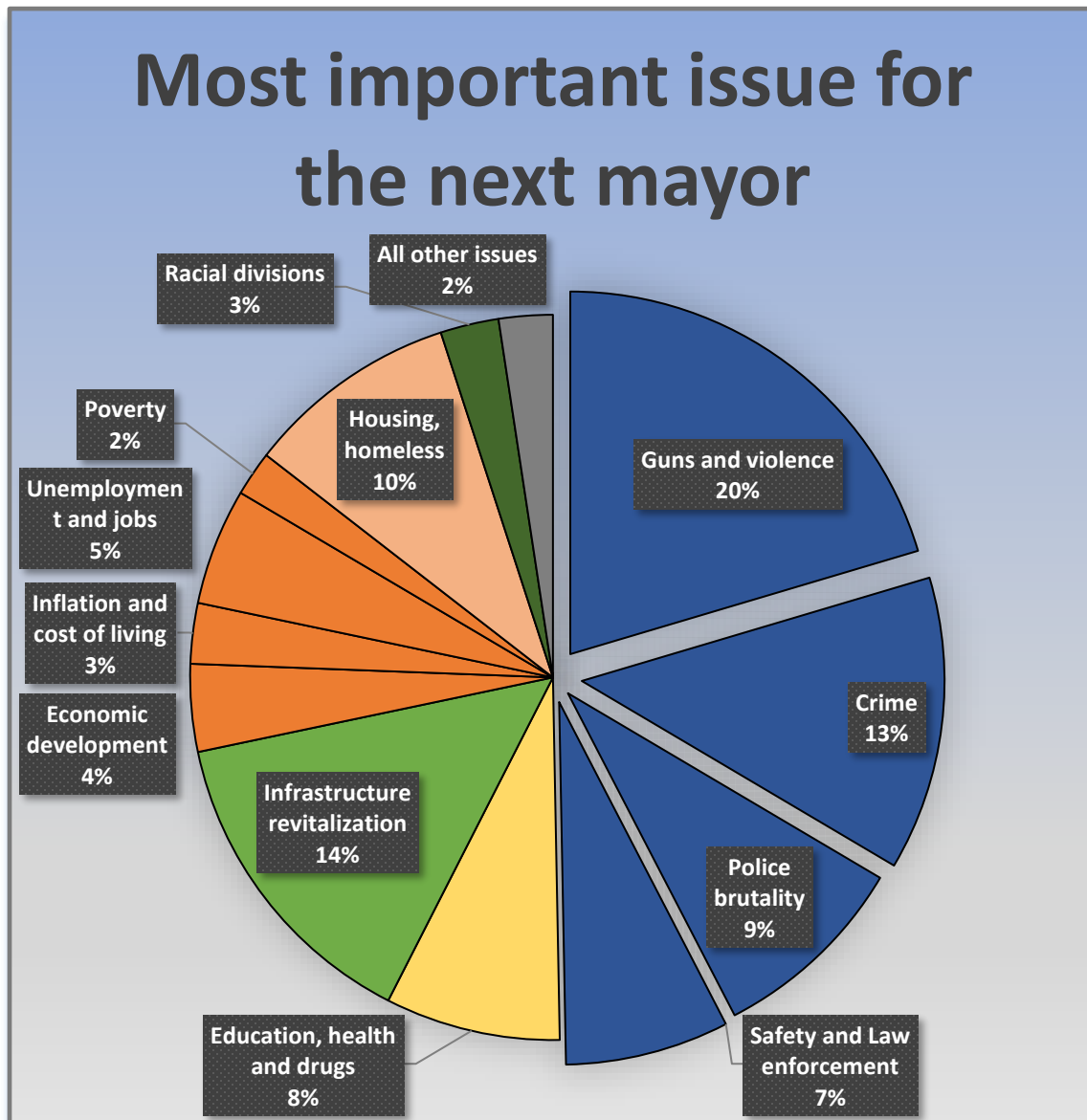
The question is: Who will prevail?

What follows is a report on the hours of work over several months by people who look like the people in our communities. They found solutions in which they believe – and those solutions bear little resemblance to the talking points of political campaigns or media entertainers.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

This was the third in a series of community conversations facilitated by [Fighting to Understand](#), a non-profit that hopes to help people confront, discuss and identify actions that address serious issues. The organization has sponsored 23 dialogues in the last two years addressing such issues as race, gender, guns and education.

The question on which people focused on Aug. 19 was this: In the wake of [Jayland Walker's death](#), how can we build trust between citizens and the criminal justice system – especially the police?



The question was not chosen at random. There is convincing evidence that this question is important to Akron:

1. A series of [scientific surveys](#) by the Center for Marketing and Opinion Research and Dr. John Green, retired political science professor from the University of Akron, showed that the death of Jayland Walker and the subsequent Grand Jury decision that Akron Police acted appropriately

had deeply divided the community. People identified crime, policing and safety as the most important issue for the incoming mayor.

2. In a series of Fighting to Understand events, participants routinely raised the issue of trust in institutions, friends and family. They did not know who to trust, or, they had become estranged from friends and family because of difficulty discussing who to trust.
3. In three subsequent community conversations designed by Fighting to Understand, these two issues merged into the challenge: How do we build trust between the people and those who are asked to keep the people safe?

In dialogues on June 21 and August 19, residents took a deep dive into that final challenge and emerged with four areas of focus that might build trust between the people and the criminal justice system, which includes the police, the courts and the prosecutors.



## HOPEFUL SOLUTIONS

The four areas of focus and some of the conversation surrounding them were:

### 1. Mental health:

1. Provide mental-health aid to people who are likely to be or are already in the criminal justice system in an effort to modify behavior or provide treatment thereby reducing their exposure to the rigors of law enforcement.
2. Recognize that police are routinely exposed to trauma and their culture is to internalize feelings – which can affect public interactions. The community should commit to effective mental-health support for police so that it becomes normalized in daily work and results in good policing.

## **2. Training and accountability:**

1. Police training should begin with higher education that incorporates modern police methods and cultural awareness of policing vs citizens. The latter requires that police are educated, trained and mentored by a diverse group that includes people outside the police sphere.
2. Training should be ongoing, addressing mental health of officers, cultural awareness and updated police practices.
3. In all of the above, there should be constant exposure to new methods that reduce risk of violence and lethal force.
4. Rewrite police procedures to incorporate all of the above and hold accountable those officers who are unable to adhere to the procedures. A significant number of participants expressed a desire that the police union embrace the benefits of this overall program – training, assistance, celebration of good policing – or face relegation.
5. It was notable that the conversation did not entertain changes for prosecutors or the courts. Representatives of those groups did not attend.

## **3. Bring police and the community into routine, positive contact:**

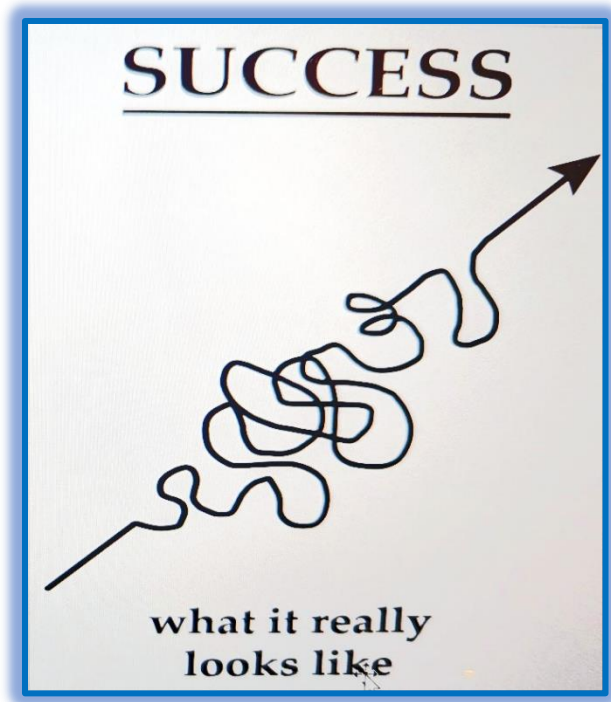
1. Create events in the community in which police are in hands-on service with people not like them. This will help with cultural awareness and continuous learning about the needs and successes at the neighborhood level.
2. Experiences that build respect for police as individuals may change community reactions with police.

## **4. Celebrate good policing:**

1. Recognizing that most exposure of police involves their enforcement of the law or intervention in difficult situations, there was a strong desire to offer an additional narrative of good policing.
2. There was recognition that human nature tends toward the sensational, thus setting a high bar for this endeavor. It must be a compelling narrative that celebrates how such things as good training, adequate funding, good discipline, sacrifice and creativity were beneficial in a difficult situation and in the end helped improve safety in the community.
3. Item B is beneficial both to helping police see what good policing is, and the public to see the complexity of good policing.

For each of the four focus areas, work groups in the August session developed action plans for community leaders, people in the criminal justice system, and themselves – citizens. Plans from each work group are detailed later in this report.

How they arrived at these plans was an illustration of the American democratic dilemma: We are all at a different place, we think we have clarity as to solutions to what ails our families, communities and nation, but when we come together, we realize that life is far more complex than we envisioned.



#### HOW PARTICIPANTS ARRIVED AT THESE SOLUTIONS

This was the third in a series of meetings focused exclusively on policing and safety in Akron. This is a journey. Participants moved from dialogue about the death of Jayland Walker and the Grand Jury decision that police acted appropriately to broader issues that might improve relations with police and in neighborhoods.

The journey through those meetings is cause for celebration:

1. In April at the first event – a Dinner and a Fight – people took passionate positions on the Grand Jury decision that police acted appropriately in the use of lethal force against Jayland Walker. Tensions ran high as people were clearly divided. Some offered heart-wrenching life experiences. Preconceived notions were quietly questioned. In an exit survey, people expressed an overwhelming desire to go deeper.
2. In June at the second conversation, new people were added as we discussed how to build trust in police and the criminal justice system. The new people didn't know about the tension of the first session. They only knew that this meeting was to produce a roadmap for creating a sense of community safety. Many expressed dissatisfactions with politicians, media and law enforcement – law enforcement being defined as local police to the Department of Justice. They developed a plan – focused primarily on changes in policing – but they acknowledged that they lacked input from the criminal justice system – especially police.
3. Police, lawyers and judges were aggressively pursued for the third event in August. . Police, although apprehensive, showed up. As they shared their needs and lived experiences, the solutions changed dramatically from the previous session. People felt informed enough to develop the four-point action plan described above.

These three sessions represent America: People arrived from different places at different times with different life experiences. With facilitation and a spirit of collaboration, people welcomed new ideas, embraced complexity, welcomed the opportunity to work with others to find common ground, and then envisioned how to push solutions into action.



Who was missing? The legal profession – judges, lawyers and prosecutors. Their stake in this issue goes far beyond the Jayland Walker case to an entire nation that is wondering whether a branch of our constitutional republic can survive. Also missing were people under age 40, who were well represented in the June session. How would the conversation have changed with them in the room?

If this is any indication, police made a marked change in this community work. The conversation was more informed. Mental health became a more robust solution and rose to the top priority.

Moreover, “celebrating police” rose in importance as it was redefined from gratuitous public relations to an opportunity to illustrate what good policing looks like and build trust and support for transformative police resources.

When it came time to develop action plans, it should be noted that the top solution – mental health – did not draw the largest participation. The largest group gravitated to training and accountability. What might be the reasons for that?

That conversation about training and accountability was marked by frustration, perceived roadblocks, and in some cases, a desire for retribution. Although participants could generate ideas that required significant changes for police – training that emphasizes less use of force, cultural transformation from within and penalties for egregious policing – they struggled with what citizens might do. Two people offered to attend an event with people unlike themselves, or a policy-making event, as a start.

That was an important finding of the event – imagining actions for citizens was hard work. This, perhaps, brings the conversation full circle to the April Dinner and a Fight, in which people elevated this idea: We are defined by our own life experiences and we expect others to conform to our experiences.

Nonetheless, participants found shared beliefs and developed lists of possible actions.



## STEPS WE CAN TAKE

After participants voted on more than 50 solutions listed on the wall, the top issues were consolidated into the four broad solutions mentioned earlier. The four topics were assigned to different areas of the room, and participants were asked to go to the topic of most interest to them to develop steps for leaders, police/criminal justice, and for citizens themselves.

While mental health drew the most votes, it did not draw the most people for developing an action plan. Nonetheless, after table reports, mental health clearly remained a focus of concern and a high priority for action.

The largest workgroup centered on training and accountability, which exposed significant dissatisfaction with police. However, the lively conversation also generated significant “aha” moments. One such moment was a statement that police-community tension may not be a White officer vs the Black community. Instead, there may be a police culture among Black and White officers vs many community cultures. There also was a feeling of powerlessness, which led to a discussion of personal responsibility.

Clearly, participants had an easier time defining how police and leaders needed to change. They struggled with actions by citizens – and that was noted several times by participants.

Here are the four action plans as written by each work group.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Critical findings that came from this work group:

- Mental health issues may be the root cause of interactions with police.
- Police experience trauma perhaps multiple times a week.
- Even onlookers who see tragedy are affected.

Barriers to addressing mental health include:

- Financial – some people do not have resources to pay for the services (lack of income, insurance, knowledge of what is available, effective referrals, etc.)
- Cultural – for many there is a negative perception for someone seeking or utilizing mental health services. Many individuals continue to have the attitude to “just suck it up”, “bury it”, “keep a brave (stoic) face”, “I can do it on my own”. This is especially true of Black males and police officers.

Broad areas of attack:

1. Cultural barriers need to be addressed on multiple fronts – youngsters, general community members, police, civic centers, everywhere.
2. One suggested solution was a “Mobile Crisis Intervention” unit of mental health professionals who are available 24/7 to de-escalate a crisis. One such program in Washington DC is run by a non-profit. The mental health professional arrives at the scene in a large, converted bread truck and asks the officer to step back and then attempts to resolve the issue without an arrest.
3. There should be an ongoing, expanding campaign to inform the public of the mental health facilities and programs in the area.
4. Provide financial assistance to those who are unable to afford the services.
5. Create more evidence-based conflict resolution programs – in the schools, in the community, in the police department.

### **What can Leaders do?**

- Study best practices in each of these areas and develop evidence based programs
- Fund these programs
- Use their visibility to promote these programs

### **What can the criminal justice system do?**

- Find ways to provide offenders with alternatives to incarceration, when appropriate. Don’t send them to jail. (perhaps similar in philosophy to the Drug Courts)

- Recognize the importance of mental health, support programs to promote mental health, and encourage (mandate?) regular participation in counseling or other such activities. One person suggested annual psychological sessions.
- Implement a crisis intervention program by professional counselors, not police officers.

#### **What can citizens do?**

- Educate ourselves
- Question leaders on their stance on these issues
- Support leaders who seem to support these issues

## **II. TRAINING AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

#### **Actions for leaders:**

- Scrap the current policing manuals and rewrite.
- It requires 18 months to obtain a barber's license, there should be a requirement of at least a year of training/education for policing.
- There has to be ongoing conversation that unpacks bias.
- Recognize this is not just White police on the Black community, it is police culture vs the communities.
- Require police to live in the community.

#### **Actions police can take**

- Police need to know their communities.
- Weed out recruits who want to exercise power. Promote emotional maturity.
- Hold each other accountable – this carried with it impatience with union resistance.
- Demilitarize.

#### **Actions people can take**

- Discipline children; Parents feel disempowered.
- Mid-level action-leaders need to pull people together.
- Help define what good policing looks like

## **III. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS OUTSIDE OF POLICING**

#### **Actions leaders can take**

- Allocate resources to participate in face-to-face activities that promote diverse gatherings, dialogue.

#### **What police can do**

- Allocate resources, schedule time to participate in community-building events
- Emphasize being part of the community as a performance expectation; if a non-resident, there should be incentives to be involved.
- Where to participate should be voluntary.
- Events should include dialogue in diverse gatherings.
- Sponsor kid-based and family-based events at which police are fully engaged



### What people can do

- Invite police to citizen events
- Citizens participate with police

## IV. CELEBRATE POLICING

This work group spent a great deal of time sharing stories, which some viewed as getting “side-tracked,” but instead was perhaps an indicator of how best to achieve this task: Story-telling.

### What citizens can do

- Non-profits should support and help tell the good efforts of police
- Organize an annual picnic
- Report on social media the good things police do.
- Positive stories can foster a culture of trust.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## APPENDIX:

### How we arrived at the solutions

A three-step process was used to reintroduce solutions developed in the June session and entertain new solutions: Reflect, add and refine. This was important because about 40 percent of participants in August were new and had no ownership of previous work.

This process also was important because it reflects the American dilemma: Complexity.

These are the solutions developed in June that were reviewed as the first step:

1. Helping young parents understand importance of loving people regardless of race – 1
2. Build relationships especially in low-income areas - 2
3. Give respect to everyone - 1
4. Teach drivers proper protocol to use when pulled over by police -0
5. Increase in honesty -1
6. Helping races come together as a community - 1
7. Change/improve police training and decision-making

8. Give police anti-bias training -1
9. Helping police and people understand biases -0
10. Gun laws for civilians - 4
11. Outreach to communities - 0
12. More conversations about problem solving rather than what happened - 0
13. Police training to demilitarize police - 3
14. Remove profit motive for arresting and incarcerating – 1
15. Increase in altruism -0
16. Equitable education for all - 2
17. Cultural competency – be knowledgeable and respectful of cultural differences within community - 13
18. Sincere listening and collaboration - 0
19. Police living within the community they're serving - 7
20. Diverse police forces - 0
21. Holding police accountable; qualified immunity – 7
22. Curate preventive program -0
23. Systemic solutions [changing Constitution ¾ clause] - 3
24. More people looking like the incarcerated in decision making process - 1
25. Transparency and stop lying -0
26. Mental health professionals working with police -7
27. Community leaders need to be part of training -3
28. Psychological testing prior to police hiring
29. Make policing a noble profession -0
30. Teaching citizens the law, what police's role is - 0
31. Abolish police unions -6
32. More police training in non-lethal force -8
33. Term limits for politicians -3
34. Put Ten Commandments back in school - 1
35. Frequent public discussions between police, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and citizens -12
36. Committees between police, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and citizens to review and make recommendations on improvements and responses -1
37. Community needs to be self-policing – 1

**Everyone was asked to reflect on the solutions list from June in two ways:**

1. Write down what they thought about the June solutions list.
2. Write down solutions that might be added.

**Here's what they said about the June solutions list:**

- Teach expectations on a police stop
- Police should have a reasonable expectation of immunity. Gross negligence is not reasonable.
- Items I like: 9 understand biases, 17 cultural competency, 26 mental health professionals working with police, 32 police training in non lethal force, 35 frequent public discussions 36 committees
- Communication, community, cross mingling, acknowledge the existence of problems, acknowledge our own contribution to the problems.
- What do I find hopeful? Solutions seem people oriented more than systems oriented. People run systems.
- Training focused and listening #17 and 26
- Value in the 10 commandments
- Importance of mental health and ongoing training
- Self policing collaboration in the community with police
- Most of the list I agree with except #34
- Education equality, teach the real history of the US, history is important not taught especially about racism is a big issue for me, so bring people together from diversity.
- Regarding the teaching of proper protocol when stopped by police, everyone regardless of race should get "the talk"
- Emphasis on coming together as a community
- Truly equitable education for all. It's not equal opportunity yet.
- Cultural competency isn't realistic
- Human element is missing in police training
- For media, for every bad thing you print, print something good
- Is this list of solutions targeting the problem or the effect of a different problem?
- I am Caucasian and I don't live in the fear that others go through.
- Build relationships especially in low-income areas. Give respect to everyone.
- Teach drivers proper protocol to use when pulled over by police.
- Improve police training and decision-making
- Holding police accountable.
- Psychological testing prior to police hiring.
- Some of the solutions are long term, some of them are short term.
- There must be an order of importance to set the list up to be able to make small accomplishments.
- objectives complete.
- Some solutions will work or can work. Some I feel will not work
- Solutions I feel positive about include 26, 27, 28, 35, 36, 37
- I wonder what is the practical application to make these solutions come to fruition.
- The list is pretty broad.
- Teach principles of anger management In schools and society.
- Breaking law consequence is required community service
- We need a shorter list that focuses on what we can accomplish

- Ideas I like include the community needs to be self policing #37 and #2 building relationships
- I feel it is a bad idea to abolish police unions.
- Gun laws for civilians number 10
- #19 police living and community depends on the geography

**Step 2: They also were asked to write down solutions that they thought should be added to the June list of solutions. This is what they wrote:**

- Police officer body cams always on cannot turn off or silence audio.
- Police officers should have a standard multi year education across the US
- Find social activities like a pancake breakfast for law enforcement and community together and have some fun together
- Find a project law enforcement and community can work on together build a bike, food drive, mixed teams
- De escalation training
- Citizens Academy communicating about the training they have been given
- #36 plus diverse makeup
- #33 plus for police new line number 32 ongoing
- Poverty alleviation
- Technical training
- Skills training
- Home economics
- Family unit reconstruction
- Judges need to be held accountable
- Accessible resources for all
- Reducing stigma that was created by slavery
- Emotions not controlling actions
- Education including constitution and capitalism one year of training for police rather than six weeks
- Give our youth a progressive struggle that they can win. Especially those in underclass socio-economics.
- More ride-alongs for citizens in police cruisers
- Broken tail light gift certificate. Creates a win-win and can lead to a fresh relationship.
- A path for bad apple police to be fired
- Return to school discipline
- Stop vilifying police
- Add contract personnel like in Afghanistan
- Work on cultural differences
- Education for their career
- Cultural achievement recognition

- Term limits for police
- Quarterly or biannual meeting to introduce new officers to the community.
- Pay professionals to attend social activities or projects between police and community.
- More training, less gun range time and combat training.
- Micro and macro society to work together
- If we celebrate the good police there need to be the same celebrated consequences of the bad; what's good for the goose must be good for the gander.
- Revisit the narrative of them versus us
- Fear on both sides. Why?
- What is our first impression when we learn the word police?
- Restoring family structure and establishing a unified community.
- Openness
- Knowing how to deal with problems especially regarding mental health.
- Establish and maintain a nationwide database of police performance by individuals
- Promote positive news examples of police working and interacting
- Establish a unified community.
- Education of children
- Mental health access for everyone in criminal justice system
- Term limits for police to avoid burnout.
- Get back to family values
- Need to stop making race an issue
- Media needs to report facts

**As the ideas above were processed at the tables, the following new solutions were added to the June list for consideration:**

1. Teach citizens the law and what police's role is
2. Mental health resources are abundant but not accessible by everyone in community
3. Cultural competency – be knowledgeable and respectful of cultural differences within the community [and police culture]
4. Give respect to everyone
5. Create a diverse police force
6. Introduce term limits for police to reduce stress
7. Require police to live within the community they serve
8. Helping young parents understand to teach loving others regardless of race
9. Committees between police, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and citizens to review and make recommendations on improvements and responses
10. School programs to build esteem and good choices
11. Community needs to be self-policing
12. Restore the family structure



13. Have education teach honest history
14. Require body cams and audio to always be on - 29. Frequent discussions between police, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and citizens
15. Helping races come together as a community
16. Put 10 Commandments back in school
17. Psychological testing prior to police hiring
18. Elect leaders who are positive role models
19. Celebrate the positive in policing
20. Not make A.A. [African-American?] the poster child – 116. Increase [police?] funding and salaries
21. Give police anti-bias training
22. Police training to demilitarize police
23. Bring all [especially white] to the table
24. Require a 2 yr education degree for police including cultural competency training

**Step 3: The old and new solutions lists were combined into common ideas, participants voted, and the top solutions were refined to represent the four topics described earlier in this report.**