

Town of Orangetown Police Reform Committee
Minutes
December 15, 2020

Present:

Teresa Kenny, Orangetown Supervisor
Donald Butterworth, Chief of Police
Michael Shannon, Police Captain
Denis Troy, Town Councilman
Dominic Crispino, First Assistant District Attorney
Barbara Gionta, First Assistant District Attorney
John McGowan, County Legislator, Youth Court & Pearl River resident
Brandon D. McLauchlin, Pastor of St. Charles AME Zion Church
Jerell Jones, Nyack HS Teacher and Coach
Nicholas S. Whalen, Orangetown Sergeant and PBA President
Elizabeth Brancati, Deputy Town Attorney
Michael Lawler, Deputy Town Supervisor & Assemblyman-elect
Allison Kardon, Clerk

Not Present:

Don Hammond, Nyack Mayor
Tanya Gayle, Nyack NAACP & Public Defenders Office
Willie Outlaw, Tappan Resident

Supervisor Teresa Kenny Introduction:

In June of this year, Gov. Cuomo signed Executive Order 203 which was entitled NYS Police Reform and Reinventive Collaborative. Required every local government agency that had a police department adopt a policing reform plan by April of 2021.

Collaborative: Working together. The Town and police are charged with reviewing the needs of the community in which Orangetown police serve and evaluate the current police policies and procedures of our police department and we need to include the entire the community in the discussion.

This meeting is one of several public outreaches. The committee must come up with policies/recommendations that the public can comment on and ultimately go to the Town Board for adoption.

We have had some presentations:

Ray Florida, Behavioral Health Response Team (BRHT)
Daphne Joslin and Gabrielle Hamilton from the Mental Health Committee of Rockland Coalition to End the New Jim Crow (RCENJC)
Chris Strattner, Instructor at the Rockland County Police and Public Safety Academy
Sgt. Nick Whalen, Orangetown Police Officer who explained the NYS Law Enforcement Accreditation Program.

We need to do a lot more and open it up to the public. Open the dialogue and given everyone who wants an opportunity to voice what they see are the concerns we should be looking at and

give us ideas how we can make the process more effective. Also have more people get involved and make the process more collaborative.

Dedicated and confidential email address: policereform@orangetown.com

Open up to Committee Members:

Pastor McLaughlin: This is collaborative, the community and police are working together to do this. We are trying to get what is best for our community.

Open to the Public:

Vicki: Is this the first open meeting?

Supervisor Teresa Kenny: We have no problem with them being open. Our first meetings were not closed. Going forward, we will post our meeting and allow the public to view but not entertain public comments at every meeting.

Paul Weiss: Question on Rockland People's Panel on Policing (RPPP)

Supervisor Teresa Kenny: I am in contact with RPPP to find out how we will work together.

Dr. Monowara Begum: Orangetown resident, psychiatrist, worked at Rockland Psychiatric Center (RPC) for 30 years and now at Summit School in Nyack, a residential treatment center. I personally have had good experiences with police. However, how we handle a mentally ill person in crisis – needs improvement. How the incoming call is handled is important. Training of police officers in de-escalation to not go in with gear is very important. In January, person with mental illness in crisis was tasered and unfortunately, she died. To avoid situations like that a mental health response team and police need to work together. Or we can come up with an alternative with a separate mental health team to deal with person in crisis to avoid injury. You can restrain someone in crisis without getting them hurt or the staff. Training, de-escalation without anyone getting hurt. Open a discussion about having a mental health response team respond to the situation who are trained and not the police. It is also stressful for the police.

Juli Finelrock: LMSW in private practice and member of the RCENJC. Her experience: A mentally ill person of color in crisis has had negative interactions with police in the past and now was injured and was in crisis. She called 911 and was able to be with him and with EMTs and police—very positive experience. A lot of advocacy to make sure he got the help he needed. Police officer spoke with her for an hour afterwards about how he felt completely unprepared to deal with the folks that he was providing emergency triage and wasn't trained for it--he was talking about his own trauma.

Investigating models all over the country that don't use police officers. If police officers are constantly traumatized, they will have difficulty with de-escalation. If you are seeing every scene as a crime scene, then it will be much more difficult to help people with disabilities, autism, in crisis, using substances. Behavioral Health Response Team is on the right track but they need

many more resources. Sometimes having someone arriving in uniform is traumatizing and scary—middle road here so we can serve the needs of our community without increased violence to our community or our police officers.

Rena Finkelstein: Resident of Orangetown and formally headed up NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Rockland for 30 years. Mother of a son living with serious mental illness. I did advocacy with families impacted with mental health challenges. I've heard many tragic stories including accounts with interactions with local police. Families and their loved ones suffer pain, trauma and often discrimination from many sources. The psychiatric hospitals have emptied out but prisons have a disproportionate number of individuals with mental illness and substance abuse disorders as well as black and brown people. Racial bias is systemic in the US. More obvious in the South but does exist in Rockland County. People tend to fear and think less of those who are different than themselves--people with mental disorders and people of another skin color. Racial bias is part of our cultural climate in housing, and educational and economic opportunities and it not exclusive to the police. Because of the protests and executive order, we have a rare opportunity to make some changes to benefit these others and the police.

I am part of the RCENJC – thank you for letting our chairman speak. We have been researching alternatives to the police that can respond to crisis, de-escalate and get help for people with all kinds of mental challenges, homelessness and other non-criminal situations that is humane and will benefit these people. Confrontations with police cause extreme trauma and fear with an individual already in crisis. If someone is already confused and annoyed and when police show up it often escalates rather than calms. It is estimated that 20%-50% of fatal encounters with police involved a person with mental illness while people with untreated mental illness are 16x times more likely to be killed by police encounters than others. The risk is compounded for people of color with black and brown people being 2.5x more likely to die. Crisis intervention should be left to trained professionals. Police responsibilities should be redirected so police don't have to response to medical emergencies, mental health crisis, homelessness, & conflict resolution. The ideal program, COHOOTS has been adapted in many cities which resulted in substantial cost savings that can used for needed social services. It frees police and DA's office to solve crimes and prosecute real criminals. Police should receive more training in CIT de-escalation techniques and sensitivity to racial bias skills for situations that come up. We have 10 separate task forces but should all work together to get a single-wide County plan. We should encourage this.

Edward Castro: Town of Orangetown: What is the threshold to involve police in a situation?

Supervisor Teresa Kenny: Training to know when to send the mental health crisis response team instead of the police. We are investigating it further.

Kathie Kelley: Wife of Sergeant in the Police Department and has a Doctorate in Nursing. There is a disconnect on how quickly mental health situations can escalate. When you bring mental health practitioners in and then call police, life -saving minutes can be lost. When we say mental health practitioners should go in but police should be backup, I think it's unfair for the police to say that because then we are expecting them to stand down until things escalate and when they

do go in and do what they're trained to do, then they're going to be lambasted in the media. It almost seems unfair. So, I'm hoping that there can be further conversation on the best plan for everyone. Because no one wants anyone to get hurt, no one wants mental health practitioners to be hurt or citizens to be hurt. We have to look at the big picture a little better.

Supervisor Teresa Kenny: I don't disagree with you Kathy. There are people that are way more versed in this area, that's why we are doing this.

Jacqui: I used to live in Palisades for many years, now I am in Clarkstown. Refreshing the meeting is open to the public. Growing up in Rockland County, if there were mental health problems they were certainly secret. I know there was a lot of substance abuse but we did not have the mental problems that we are seeing today. So many people are on the edge with so many things in their lives that have changed because of COVID that things can escalate very quickly if there is already a problem. This is a rare opportunity to try and look at policies and procedures across the entire County to have some sort of uniform way of handling things. I also wanted to address the person that was worried about if there's someone who really is a danger possibly with a weapon. I am with RCENJC Mental Health Committee as well. We did find that a lot of calls come into a center where they're triaged with professionals to determine if that's something that needs a backup of the police to begin with. So, there's the worker's safety, the person's safety, there's the police safety, there's respecting that the police do know certain things that have to be called in certain situations. So, this is just not like let's only send out mental health teams, this is not to be disregarding police. It's just to say that mental health professionals and peer advocates are people who can work with someone who's in a crisis more easily than police and can de-escalate in a different kind of way. Would hope the other communities make their meetings public because it is really important for the public to know what is going on.

Supervisor Teresa Kenny: In speaking with one of our police officers, he did mention that domestic calls are on the rise and that's due to the pandemic and people being stressed. It goes across a broad spectrum with needing people to intervene in these things. But we are reaching out to the all of the organizations, we're reaching out to the Family for Safety and Change, the Pride Center, the Nyack Center. We are trying to reaching as many organizations that may have ideas and suggestions and want to be involved. If anyone can think of an organization that we should reach out to, please let us know here or at policereform@orangetown.com.

Councilman Denis Troy: Any input from Police or County Dispatchers in terms of the types of calls that they get in terms of how they do triage.

Supervisor Teresa Kenny: We have not, but I will put in on the top of my list for our next meeting.

Councilman Denis Troy: Hard to identify in this, particularly a domestic dispute if it's a mental health issue but the other thing that maybe the person making the call feels physically threatened. I assume the dispatchers are trained. But in terms of mental health training, that is something that should be looked at.

Pastor McLauchlin: I just wanted to quickly say that I know some people don't think that seeing a police officer can trigger. I have had good interactions with police officers but I've also had some negative ones as a person of color. And that fear is there for a lot of us and I am glad we are having this time to talk. I hope that people don't trivialize how people of color feel. It's different when you have to walk in our shoes. For me, turning my turn signal on can be a matter of life and death because if I get pulled over and something escalates it's just different. The last time I got pulled over was because the officer said I had fresh damage on my car. That is something a lot of people don't have to deal with. I just don't want people to trivialize and just think that I have had great experiences (with police). You might have but there's another community that has a pain that I hope at least you will talk with us. If you don't agree that's one thing but at least have a conversation with us to understand what we're going through and how we feel about the things that are going on. No one is painting every police officer as bad, the same way I hope nobody paints every preacher as bad when one pastor does something wrong. But we do want to have real conversations about the trauma that is taking place and I hope that we can continue on and have healthy dialogue as a community, as people who are living here in Orangetown.

Supervisor Teresa Kenny: I appreciate everyone who stepped up to be on this committee. It's not easy sometimes to have these conversations but they have to be had, so thank you to everybody. I am an email away: policereform@orangetown.com.