

Community leaders to youth: 'Get home safely'



- PHOTO BY ABIGAIL BECKER

Community members and local leaders gather in a prayer circle after a meeting Thursday.

Getting home safely was the message community leaders emphasized to local youth at an informational session Thursday at the Dane County Boys and Girls Club, held as the nation grappled with more officer-involved shootings and local tensions have flared between police and some community members.

Led by local Boys and Girls Club CEO Michael Johnson and joined by leaders including Bishop Harold Rayford; executive director of Vision Beyond Bars Richard Harris; [Caliph Muab'El](#) and [Corinda Rainey-Moore](#), about 50 youth listened to a presentation on 10 rules of how to act in an encounter with a police officer.

Some of these rules, called "10 rules of survival if stopped by the police," included being polite and respectful, not running from the situation and not resisting arrest.

Rayford added one of his own: "Comply and complain" — that is, comply with officers, but complain to the department review process if wrongly treated.

“At the end of the day, what we want is for everyone to get home safely,” Rayford said.

Few young individuals spoke up, but those that did asked what actions should be taken instead of talking about community violence.

Sequoia Holmes, 16, of Madison, said instead of watching videos of people being arrested, to focus on how to fix problems facing local youth.

Johnson announced he is working with other grassroots leaders and Mayor Paul Soglin on recommendations to reduce violence at a cost of approximately \$3 million to the city.

Holmes also described how police officers walk through her neighborhood, which is predominantly people of color, and ask "suspicious" questions to residents.

“It makes kids uncomfortable,” Holmes said.

While young people were the main audience at the event, Holmes said she feels like teenagers were not heard.

“I feel like it was more for the adults than for the teens,” Holmes said.

Just a day prior to the community forum, Philando Castile, a black man, was killed by a police officer during a routine traffic stop in Minnesota and early Tuesday morning, Alton Sterling, an African-American man was shot and killed by white police officers in Baton Rouge.

In Madison, Michael Schumacher, a white man who had struggled with mental health issues, was killed by a police officer after Madison Police Chief Mike Koval said the man was "aggressing" toward the officer with a pitchfork after breaking in to a home on the city's east side. That was less than two weeks after 18-year-old Genele Laird, a black woman, was forcibly arrested outside of East Towne Mall.

“We’re at a critical point in this country of protecting African-American youth,” Harris said.

Rainey-Moore emphasized that these episodes of violence are publicized, easily viewed due to social media and can have lifelong damaging effects on youth.

12-year-old Ailyah Moore described witnessing violence since she was 3 years old. She is now in foster care, but when she was 9 years old she watched her mother be taken away by police, screaming and crying.

“It’s really hard to witness,” Moore said.

She said that the Thursday discussion made her see things in a different light but that youth can be forgotten about during intense police encounters with adults in their lives.

“The police aren’t thinking about what’s happening to younger kids,” Moore said in front of the group. “It’s kind of messing some kids up in their head.”

Law enforcement representatives

The session was followed by a panel that included Chief Koval, University of Wisconsin-Madison Police Department Chief Sue Riseling and Dane County District Attorney Ismael Ozanne.

Topics ranged from use of force, Laird's arrest and racial disparities in Madison. Regarding Laird's arrest, Koval emphasized that the case is under investigation and that the officers' behaviors and enforcement techniques have to go through a review process.

Koval said it is never the role of police to punish but it is to control the situation and relinquish control once the individual is compliant.

“Anything above and beyond control is considered excessive,” Koval said. “That’s not to say we can't be disturbed by the optics of what we’ve witnessed.”

Ozanne said that it is difficult to give answers demanded to the community because the case is an open investigation. He recognized that the video of Laird’s arrest and the use of force in general is “disturbing.”

But all the facts in this arrest, including both Laird and the officers, have not been gathered, Ozanne reiterated.

“When an officer acts inappropriately, just as with anyone who acts inappropriately, there has to be an investigation,” Ozanne said.

On disparities in Madison, Ozanne said victims of crimes cannot be left out of the system.

“Just because the system may be broken now, there are too many people of color within it, we cannot not address behavior,” Ozanne said.

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