

Community Equity Council

Community Listening Circle 2 – July 17th

Community Organization: African Canadian Association of Ottawa



African Canadian Association is an umbrella organization for all the African descent ethno-cultural organizations in the Ottawa-Gatineau area. “African Canadian Association of Ottawa (ACAO) is mandated to unite all peoples of African descent and promote socio-economic well-being of African Canadians in the National Capital Region. One of the goals of African Canadian Association of Ottawa (ACAO) is to ensure civic participation and community engagement of the people of African descent; African, Caribbean and Black Canadians (ACBC).”

A. What are some areas that need strengthening?

John Adeyefa, President of the Association started the discussion with a presentation of concerns and solutions:

Summary of Grievances and Ways to Improve OPS – Community Relations

1. Community Relationship With the Police

- Not the best at the moment. There is mistrust and suspicious long before the unfortunate death of Abdirahman Abdi. But since his passing, the relationship has deteriorated
- Racial Bias – evident in the Traffic Stop Study
- Excessive use of force when it comes to people of African descent. Many examples exist
- Carding
- Lack of cultural sensitivity
- Discrimination and racism in OPS and internal disenchantment

2. What Needs To Improve

- Officers responding to calls on black youth, whether in the schools or in the community, must go in with a fair unbiased mind. Do not condemn us before you talk to us. Deescalate and don't be confrontational.
- The way the police interact with the community should improve. The police have to be mindful of real or perceived power dynamics when dealing with unarmed members of our community.
- Improve trust – OPS have to make it a point to attend community-organized events such as cultural events and festivals. This will help improve relationships.

- Redefine Community Policing – We are aware community policing is back, but it needs to be properly shaped to reflect the diversity and values of Ottawa. It must be based on building relationship or partnership with the community and the outcomes must be known to help evaluating impact.
- Improve feedback mechanism.

3. What Do You Want the CEC to Focus On?

- Ensure that OPS is attentive to the impact of hate crimes and hate-motivated incidents. That means proper training on cultural competencies and embracing equity, diversity and inclusion.
- Ensure the community is duly informed of the products of community consultations and independent investigations. OPS have the tendency to refuse to or delay releasing reports, and this creates suspicious.
- Work with OPS Board to focus on reforming OPS to reflect multicultural Ottawa, Including recruitment, retention and promotion.
- Ensure OPS is proactive in responding to community issues and not reactive.
- Ensure OPS understands particularly black youths. The relationship should go beyond playing basketball with select youth. To a large extent, the community feels OPS criminalize our youth even before they encounter them. Some of our youth come from countries where they saw police officers as someone to avoid at all costs. Understanding the culture and black experience will go a long way to build a healthy relationship.
- CEC should be involved in the selection of the new police chief.
- CEC should provide an avenue for people to report their interactions with the police, whether positive or negative.

B. Key messages out of the discussions

1. This City belongs to all of us.
2. We need to be partners in addressing crime in our communities. We recognize that there is criminal activity in some of our communities and at some times. Like the police we do not want that criminal activity in our communities. We also don't want all community members to be assumed to be criminals.
3. Our children and youth are our priority. Mothers and fathers are worried if their children interact with the police that bad things will happen or situations will escalate. Police are supposed to be the people we go to. Where do we go if we are afraid of the police?
4. Policing may be your job but creating safety in our communities is a collective responsibility. We want to have trust and a partnership between police and community. That is our goal, but we are not there at this time. Trust is low and there is pain in our relationship.
5. The relationship that we currently have has shown us that we don't really know or understand each other. We don't know how to have respectful relationships with each other. Many community members have described experiences of being profiled as a criminal or doing something criminal when just going about day-to-day life: driving a car, standing on a corner with friends, etc.

6. Police are supposed to be about security for all community members but there is a real perception that police decrease security in our communities. This is especially true for our youth who do not think police are a safe place to go to.
7. There are cultural and language differences that act as barriers in our relationship. There is also racism in our society. The OPS needs to decide what role they will play in addressing racism in our society.
8. What do the police see when they see us? For police to serve the community, they need to know the community. What do OPS members know about the members of the African Canadian community? What do you know about our cultures, life experience, the police relationship in our original country, our language and the trauma that has come with us?
9. We want to acknowledge the work that the OPS does for the community.
10. We also want to acknowledge that the behaviour of our youth is in part our responsibility. We have to do our own work as parents, family members and community members to raise our youth.

C. Further Suggestions out of the Discussion on Strengthening Relationships

1. There is a need to change the police relationship in our communities. Some suggestions:
 - a. Increase the times that police interact with the community when there is not an incident but when relationships can be established and built. We don't want to just interact with community members or culturally diverse OPS members but the members that we don't have a relationship with. How can we learn about each other if we don't interact?
 - b. Have programs in the community that connect OPS members with community members, especially with the youth. Also be advocates for community based programs in parts of Ottawa where youth need supports.
 - c. Have honest conversations when issues arise. When community members describe the experience as racist, we need to have ways to discuss what that means.
2. There are so many assumptions being made about people in our community. We have multiple communities. We have community members who were born and raised here. We have new immigrants and older immigrants with a diversity of experiences. Don't reduce all immigrants into boxes with assumptions. Recognize that there are different experiences for immigrants: generational, francophone/anglophone and different experiences based on gender so we have to have multiple strategies to connect and relate. Also each African country is different. There are 55 countries represented in the African Canadian Association of Ottawa. This nuanced knowledge base needs to be incorporated into OPS training and learning about the community.

- a. How can we learn about each other?
 - b. What is the best way to show respect for each other?
3. Question that recurs in our community: do we receive the same support as other community members when a crime happens? There has to be an openness that racism is in our society and OPS is not immune. The key question is: how is the OPS addressing racism when it arises?
4. There are some immigrants who have had only negative experiences with police. How are police trained so that they approach people calmly and don't escalate fear?
5. Learn basic greetings in as many languages as possible. It shows you see people and are making an effort.
6. If our children and youth are involved, the OPS need to have a better connection with the community, then you can use other ways to deescalate situations. We have family leaders, community leaders and faith leaders who can reach out to the youth who are acting out and can work with the police to address situations.
7. What is the value of the OPS website having the "most wanted" notice? Does it work? Sometimes there are a disproportionate number of members of the black community on that list. Does it create community bias?
8. Engage the black members in the OPS and ask them confidentially what is their experience within OPS. Also, is there a role for racialized OPS members to be advocates to bridge the divide between community and OPS?
9. OPS play a role in supporting community based gun control campaigns.
10. OPS make the best use of the Community Equity Council as they are representatives from our community. We need their work and recommendations to be implemented and reported on.

D. Next Steps

1. Catalyst will prepare a summary of the discussion. (September, 2019)
2. The report will be circulated to all Community Equity Council members and to the African Canadian Association of Ottawa for review. (September, 2019)
3. The report will be directed to be discussed at two CEC committees: Anti-Racism Committee and the Communications Committee. (September, 2019)
4. Follow up meeting with the African Canadian Association of Ottawa with CEC members. (October - November, 2019)
5. Final recommendations go to the CEC to be supported.