

Summary: As we prepare our final reports for the IDOT study, I documented my thoughts on this whole experience. I can state that it has been an incredible opportunity to see the way the police and community perceive one another, and I am thankful for the opportunity for being a part of this process. That being said, here are my thoughts:

-Meeting summary with Chief Connolly

I was glad that we had the opportunity to meet Chief Connolly and direction he has moved the police department. I felt that after that meeting the outreach to the community was very impressive. I was also glad that he shared his philosophy, police procedure for traffic stops, and the information concerning the limited resources available within the department. It is clear that those limitations have an impact on the collection efforts.

I felt it was valuable to hear his thoughts on the allocation of police and how they need to balance community policing with crime reduction. Based on what I learned it is obvious that he requires his officers to be more engaged with their community and requires them to meet and recognize the needs of the many neighborhoods throughout the city. To date the city has seen an increase of neighborhood watch groups from 11-28. We all agree on the importance of educating the community about their rights and responsibility and the willingness to create educational programs that can encourage the community to participate and learn. Another idea discussed at that meeting was the expansion of the Cop Corner Program and the need to target other languages within our community. Beyond English and Spanish, for example he wants to address other community members including Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese and French.

I was also pleased to hear about his initiative to create the advisory team that includes African Americans and Latinos. Also, Chief Connolly has collaborated with Chief Christensen at UIUC with the Asian community. I like his suggestions about the “ride along” and the Citizens Police Academy in order for the community to be informed about Police work. All in all, the meeting really opened my eyes about how engaged and transparent the department is trying to be. Most importantly, I was really glad that we all had the same concerns about the “why,” of traffic stops. Chief Connolly implemented a process during this study that required officers to begin collecting the “why.” I look forward to seeing more about those results.

-Ride-along experiences with the Urbana Police Department

My ride along was scheduled for a Friday evening from 7pm to midnight. I had the opportunity to ride with Officer Betsy Alfonso. I was provided with a ballistic vest and I was asked to sign a waiver. Due to calls for service and a directed patrol at Lierman Drive and Hunter Street I was only able to witness one traffic stop. We were at the corner of Washington Street and Philo Road around 11:15pm when we observed a

vehicle traveling with one head light. From my view point, I couldn't see what kind of car, model, year and how many people were in the car. Officer Alfonso proceeded after the vehicle to conduct a traffic stop. Once behind the vehicle, Officer Alfonso activated her emergency lights and used the police radio to call in the traffic stop with the location, vehicle description, and license plate information. This was all shared with the radio dispatcher. The vehicle stopped and for safety reasons I was asked to stay in the vehicle. Officer Alfonso put down my window so I could hear the outside conversation. During the stop I could not hear everything the driver was saying to Officer Alfonso, however I did observe and witness Officer Alfonso conducting this stop in the same manner that Chief Connolly had previously stated it would be. Officer Alfonso was professional and polite to the driver. The woman driver told Officer Alfonso that she had been having issues with her vehicle and knew that the headlamp was not working. Officer Alfonso then allowed me to get out of the vehicle and I was able to see that the woman driver was African American who could not provide proof of insurance. Officer Alfonso asked this woman if she had a smart phone and if so, could she research her last insurance payment as proof. The suggestion by Officer Alfonso allowed this woman to locate her insurance payment and thus avoid a citation for no insurance. Officer Alfonso action corroborated what Chief Connolly shared and it appeared the officers go above and beyond when the opportunity is presented. Officer Alfonso then issued the woman a warning for the head lamp violation and advised her to get the headlamp fixed to avoid future stops by the police. I was told that all traffic stops require documentation and in years pass, the officers completed the stop with a verbal warning, now they have to prepare a written warning or traffic citation. The IDOT data is collected for each of those documents.

-Opinions about the February Town Hall Meeting and how we believed the experience benefited police-community engagement

From the February Town Hall Meeting, I feel that we had the opportunity to find out from the community how they perceive the interaction with law enforcement. Some of those interactions reflected fear, concern, mistrust, frustration, and hopelessness. Some others showed the value, trust, and hope to work together to make a better experience between the community and the law enforcement. I was pleasantly surprised to hear the lack of recurring concerns about the Urbana Police.

We had the opportunity to gather group and discuss different questions and one of the ideas that came out was to work the police institute training at U of I to work on the interactions between community members and law enforcement. In my opinion, we have to work together to heal the things that hurt the community and law enforcement. Therefore, in the meantime of healing, we need to have a better attitude towards working together for solutions that affect both groups.

I feel we have a good department and a good police chief who demonstrates his commitment to maintain peace and safety within the community. He has demonstrated that he has passed his philosophy to his officers and I have witnessed those good actions with Officer Charles and Officer Alfonso.

-Observations and recommendations for the report

In my opinion, this disparity is a problem not only in our town but across the country. The positive impact of this study is that it will help us work together with our local police department to continue to try to find answers and explanations for disparity. While this group started this process, there is considerably more work to be done in the community and the police department for us to better understand what is happening in our community and similar sized cities across the state and nation.

Report submitted by Alejandra Coronel

“You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is like an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty”.

Mahatma Gandhi