

Office of the Kane County State's Attorney



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KANE SAO, DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE HOST SYMPOSIUM ON POLICE, COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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Trust and communication are the keys to effective relationships between police and the communities they serve, local and federal law-enforcement officials say.

That message was repeated by the participants who made presentations at a symposium hosted by Kane County State's Attorney Joe McMahon in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice, the Aurora Police Department, Elgin Police Department and Elgin Community College. The event, held Wednesday, May 13, 2015, at ECC, was designed to ensure effective relationships between police and their communities.

"It is obvious that many members of our community feel their lives don't matter," McMahon said in his introductory remarks. "There is a distrust and a perception of us versus them. I have a responsibility to start from the beginning and break this perception and mend this broken trust, and today is a small step toward that goal."

"Moving Beyond Ferguson," held in ECC's Seigle Auditorium, featured multiple presentations by the U.S. Department of Justice, presentations about police best practices and effective crowd management, a panel discussion about how police departments can monitor themselves, and a panel discussion about strengthening relationships between police and the community.

Approximately 200 guests were in attendance, including representatives from dozens of police departments, along with elected officials, and community leaders including lawmakers, clergy, school officials, social service agencies, prosecutors, defense attorneys and members of the judiciary.

"My goal for the day is twofold," McMahon said. "First, to continue the conversation about law enforcement and criminal justice that already is taking place in many communities across the region about events in Ferguson, New York, Cleveland, about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, and now in Baltimore. But also to highlight some of the good work that our leaders already are engaged in to reach out to the

community we serve. Second, to provide information about substantive resources that are available to each of your agencies.

“The motivation behind this event is to stay in front of these issues and set an example in the region that good, aggressive police work and good community relations are not mutually exclusive but go hand in hand with fighting crime and holding criminals accountable,” McMahon said.

The event opened with four presentations from the Department of Justice:

- Deborah Spence on Community Oriented Policing Services and federal assistance for departments
- Vick Lombardo on federal civil rights issues and excessive use of force
- Meg Gorecki on federal training and resources for police and municipalities
- Michael Nila on the Blue Courage program for modern police officers

Gorecki is a former Kane County State’s Attorney who now works for the U.S. Department of Justice as the Midwest Regional Director, Community Relations Service. Nila is a former Aurora police officer who now is a Bureau of Judicial

Elgin, Aurora officers get views beyond Ferguson

Gloria Casas, Elgin Courier-News

Former Elgin Deputy Chief and current Sanford Police Chief Cecil Smith was in Ferguson, Mo., for the first community meeting between police and residents shortly after the shooting of Michael Brown last August.

Police expected about 300 people to attend. But 1,000 turned out and it got nasty, Smith said.

"The community was very, very angry with the police department and the fact there was just so much separation between police and the community," Smith said.

Smith was one of the speakers at a symposium, Moving Beyond Ferguson, presented Tuesday by the Kane County State's Attorney in partnership with the Department of Justice, Aurora police department, Elgin police department and Elgin Community College.

What events in Ferguson, Mo., Baltimore, Md. and other cities — where incidents between police and the public reached critical mass — have shown Kane County officials is the need to have open conversations, foster relationships and build trust with communities, officials said.

Cities such as Elgin and Aurora have held community meetings inviting the public to come talk with police, discuss issues and learn what is happening.

"We are not doing anything that is special, what we do is have genuine conversations with people," Elgin Police Chief Jeffery Swoboda said. "Where I feel we are successful is we have genuine conversations with people. We listen. We do a lot of listening."

Elgin is continuing its Community Conversation, which brings together the community, clergy and police to discuss topics like what to do when you are involved in a traffic stop. Swoboda also does a walk and knock around town.

He joined the police department in 1992 and was a Resident Officer Program of Elgin (ROPE) which stressed community policing. Today, community policing is not restricted to the ROPE program, it is the way EPD polices, Swoboda said.

Aurora Police Chief Greg Thomas recently organized a community group meeting based on a spike in shootings and had a good turnout. He expects to hold more meetings and hopes to engage the 30 neighborhood groups within the city.

"The right time to build relations is not after the incident but prior to" anything going wrong, Thomas said.

Smith, who was Elgin's first African-American deputy chief in its 175-year history, arrived in Sanford in April 2013 and replaced a white police chief who was a hometown guy and well liked.

The issue in Sanford surrounding the shooting of Trayvon Martin was not about policing but a race issue, Smith said. There was a separation between the have and have-nots, he said. There was also a separation of the community and city government, he said.

Assistance consultant.

McMahon then led a panel discussion among Elgin Chief Jeff Swoboda, Aurora Chief Greg Thomas, and Chief Cecil Smith of the Sanford, Fla., Police Department. Smith is

an Elgin native and former Elgin deputy chief who became the Sanford chief after unrest surrounding Trayvon Martin's death.

All three said they have had great success by simply talking with – and more important, listening to – the citizens in their communities.

Swoboda said, "All policing is community policing."

Thomas said, "The right time to build relations is not after the incident but prior to it."

Attorney Marcia Thompson of the Chicago law firm Hillard Heintze, LLC, then talked about police best practices. Chicago Police Sgt. Larry Snelling followed by sharing information about preparing for, responding to and the differences between demonstrations and riots.

The event closed with a panel discussion among minority community leaders about building and maintaining relationships with the police. The citizen panel comprised City of Aurora Spokesman Clayton Muhammad, Aurora Alderwoman Scheketa Hart-Burns, Aurora resident Cynthia Miller, Art Velasquez of the Aurora chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens, Elgin City Councilwoman Tish Powell and Helen Lopez-Strom of the Elgin chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens. The panel was moderated by Aurora Police Cmdr. Kristen Ziman.

"Thank you to everyone who participated," McMahon said. "Their contributions made this event a tremendous success. Thank you to everyone who was in attendance. I hope the event generates further discussion about how we can live in united communities.

"Thanks, especially, to Dr. David Sam of Elgin Community College for his incredible helpfulness and generosity for the use of Seigle Auditorium," McMahon said.