How Can ACPAC Address Systemic Racism?

When fully configured, the Albany Community Policing Advisory Committee (ACPAC) has 25 members, most of whom are appointed by Common Council members representing Albany’s 15 wards. The Mayor and the Common Council President each appoint one person. The Police Chief appoints four, and up to four members are appointed by a subcommittee of ACPAC members. Citizen members are all unpaid volunteers, and ACPAC has never been officially authorized by vote of the Albany Common Council. Absent a clear, official mandate from the Common Council, the extent to which this body can serve as a vehicle through which to address systemic racism is constrained by an apparent diminishing APD commitment to community policing, and the Committee’s lack of resources.

ACPAC was created in 2010, when newly appointed Police Chief Steven Krokoff fully embraced the philosophy of community policing. According to ACPAC’s “Final Report and Recommendations” in June 2010, ACPAC took form when the APD “determined that the best course of action would be to form an internal and external advisory committee that would make recommendations to the police administration on implementation of a new community policing philosophy.” The administration sought the assistance of the Common Council in appointing members to the external advisory committee. In January 2010, the Common Council voted unanimously to supply the APD with names of appointees.

During the first half of 2010, the Committee organized itself into three sub-committees dealing with three topics: healing wounded communities, allocating resources, and public participation. Three public input meetings were conducted, in the South End, Arbor Hill, and Pine Hills. All three meetings addressed three main questions: what are the community’s expectations of the police department; what can the APD do to enhance its relationship with the community; and what can citizens do to enhance the relationship with the police department. The Committee’s final report offered three dozen recommendations, including establishing mutual respect, trust, and accountability between the community and the APD; utilizing fair and just police tactics and improving officers’ attitudes; and recommended trainings for the community and the APD based on cultural competency.

As recommended by the Committee in their final report, ACPAC was continued to provide “ongoing input, assistance, and evaluation.” The ten-year life span of ACPAC has seen four Police Chiefs: Steven Krokoff (2010-2015), Brendan Cox (2015-2016), Acting Police Chief Robert Sears (2017-2018); and Eric Hawkins (2018-present). During that time frame, each particular chief’s perspective on community policing has impacted ACPAC’s activities. In October 2019, ACPAC founding member Beverly Padgett, who served during the tenure of all four administrations, submitted her resignation to ACPAC members, “with heavy heart and great reluctance.”

In her resignation letter, Padgett laments ACPAC changes in the years since Chief Steven Krokoff unveiled Albany’s strategic plan to implement community policing, “introduced and broadcast on a TEDX platform via the Internet” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mdctkaf1-
In this 15-minute 2013 film, Krokoff lauds ACPAC for its hard work over the years to create a foundation of trust between the police and the community, and describes the APD as “a police department transformed by its community.” He refers to ACPAC’s Padgett as “a tremendous driver behind the success of community policing,” and says APD’s new strategic plan, vision, mission, and meaningful core values could not have been developed without ACPAC’s commitment.

Says Padgett in her 2019 resignation letter:

As ACPAC continued to work building relationships with city residents and like minded organizations, the Albany Police Department became one of fifteen Police Agencies to be recognized by the White House. Everyone was looking for best practices. ACPAC was contacted often and the work seem to be going well. Community Policing became a buzz word.

With the uptick in community policing, Elected Officials tried to take over the external (citizen) portion of the committee. We all knew that would not work, residents in the community needed to work with other residents. And politics needed to stay out of it. ACPAC is a volunteer citizen committee. …

… As leadership changed, ACPAC was no longer partnering with like minded organizations, there was infighting among the members and the committee was taken off the path that had gotten them national attention (National Law Enforcement Museum, October 2018 - 21st Century Policing). The Albany Police Department also stop including ACPAC in some of their community events.

Foremost among ten recommendations Padgett offers in her resignation letter: “There is no community policing without the community.” In late 2019 and early 2020, Police Chief Hawkins announced a realignment of the APD’s workforce. Areas that Albany beat officers covered in the city were enlarged, decreasing the number of areas from 18 to 10. Beat officers will have larger geographic areas to patrol. Community members felt left out of the decision. After the realignment was announced, the ACPAC Chair said “We're going to have full access to all the records all their data that they have, going to look at all of that and see are they really doing what they say they're doing, are the officers getting out and meeting the community." ACPAC said it will be keeping a close eye on the data over the next year, "so we can report back to the police on recommendations of change on what's good and what's working, and also report back to the community.”

From 2010 to 2020, ACPAC’s role has effectively been downgraded from the creative, pro-active APD partner that Chief Krokoff extolled as “a tremendous driver behind the success of community policing,” to a reactive body relegated to the role of watchdog. This is not to denigrate the very dedicated and hard-working citizen members of ACPAC, but Albany needs a clear, official directive from the Common Council specifying an interactive role for ACPAC in the development, implementation, and evaluation of APD policies and practices that have thus far sustained systemic racism. Absent that official mandate, Albany’s advisory committee is only as strong as its current police chief’s commitment to community policing.

Next Friday’s Commentary: LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion) ---
Forerunner of Albany’s Reinvented Public Safety System?