Is City Leadership Failing the Collaborative --- and the Community?

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
*James Baldwin*

Ironically, the Baldwin quote above is the tagline on the City’s web page for the Albany Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative. The irony lies in the fact that Mayor Kathy Sheehan spent the better part of the Collaborative’s September 29th meeting repeatedly downplaying the relevance of community trauma when tasked with reinventing policing in Albany.

In defiance of Baldwin’s admonition, the City is not facing some simple, undeniable truths:

- Albany’s history of policing is one profoundly impacted by systemic racism;
- People in Albany’s communities of color have suffered individual and collective trauma as a result of policing contaminated by systemic racism; and
- Reform must be accompanied by Reckoning --- policing in Albany cannot be reformed without acknowledging and addressing the trauma caused by past APD actions.

Several community members at the September 29th meeting stressed that the Collaborative needs to address the trauma experienced by residents of color in their interactions with the Albany Police Department. Though Mayor Sheehan acknowledged that the issue is important, she appeared to minimize its importance to the Collaborative’s work, stating:

“This is something that is missing from this Collaborative. The piece … around trauma, individual trauma, community trauma, interactions that people have had with the police, and finding a space for that communication to occur. And I agree that this is very important. But the work that we are required to do as Collaborative members is to receive and seek input and community participation to inform policy decisions.”

The Mayor’s statement implies that policy recommendations regarding the reinvention of policing in Albany can be made without considering the trauma suffered by people of color. This approach disregards the very *reason* Governor Cuomo mandated the Collaborative, as expressed in Executive Order #203:

“**WHEREAS**, black lives matter; and

**WHEREAS**, the foregoing compels me to conclude that urgent and immediate action is needed to eliminate racial inequities in policing, to modify and modernize policing strategies, policies, procedures, and practices, and to develop practices to better address the particular needs of communities of color to promote public safety, improve community engagement, and foster trust;”.

The Mayor has renounced any responsibility for the City to provide a mechanism through which community members can comfortably and safely share their experiences with the Collaborative. Instead, the task of “creating a safe place” for dialogue, as one community member described it, has fallen to the Collaborative’s five Working Groups.

But the Mayor is not making the Working Groups’ task easy. Dismissing the assertions of no fewer than 10 of the Collaborative’s community members that many who have suffered at the hands of the APD are too traumatized to talk freely in the presence of police, Mayor Sheehan has insisted on assigning an APD
Commander or Deputy Chief to every Working Group. The Mayor said at the September 29th Collaborative meeting that,

“By order of the Governor’s Executive Order, we have police officers who are required to be assigned to Working Groups.”

This latter statement is simply not true. The Governor’s Executive Order requires only that “The political subdivision, in coordination with its police agency, must consult with stakeholders, including but not limited to membership and leadership of the local police force,” and other required participants. Nowhere does it even mention “Working Groups,” or state that police personnel must be included in every Collaborative discussion.

The Center sincerely appreciates the persistence of the many intrepid Collaborative members who relentlessly stressed the importance of a safe space for community testimony. The Mayor doggedly insisted that APD officers would be assigned to each Working Group, but finally reluctantly allowed that some Working Group meetings could be held without APD personnel present. The final exchange on the subject went as follows:

Community Collaborative Member: “To be clear: an officer will be assigned to each Working Group, but there can be meetings without officers?”
Mayor Sheehan: “That is correct. If that is what your Working Group decides, I am going to be respectful of that decision.”

Consider the totality of the City’s efforts to control the community’s influence in the Collaborative:

- No call for volunteers to serve on the Collaborative was put out to the Community --- the Collaborative was established by the City;
- Excluded from the Collaborative are those who have most recently made “calls for reform” (to use the Governor’s language), including Black Lives Matter and Citizen Action;
- Excluded from the Collaborative are those who have advocated for the rights of minorities in Albany’s criminal justice system for literally decades, including the NAACP, the New York Civil Liberties Union, and the Center for Law and Justice;
- Despite the Mayor’s expressed respect for consensus, the subject areas of the five Working Groups did not arise organically through Collaborative consensus but were designated by City officials;
- Community members’ requests for additional Working Groups were denied because, according to the Mayor, the City is not sufficiently staffed to allow for additional groups; and
- An APD Commander or Deputy Chief will observe nearly every Working Group meeting.

This can hardly be called a “Collaborative” --- to date, all of the decisions have been made by the City. But Albany is fortunate to have assertive Collaborative members persistently advocating for a community voice. Hopefully, the Working Group process will produce more collaborative results.

To the community members of the Albany Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative: The Center for Law and Justice appreciatively salutes you!

Upcoming Commentary Topics: “Resisting Arrest”
“This is The Time for Reckoning”