

Half-dozen police chiefs, dozens of residents attend Reading Branch of NAACP town hall meeting

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The killings of black men by police and deadly attacks on police has placed the relationship between law enforcement and the public on center stage across the country, including in Berks County.

On Wednesday night the Reading Branch of the NAACP hosted a town hall meeting in Albright College's Merner-Pfeiffer-Klein Memorial Chapel to tackle the issue head-on.

The meeting featured a half-dozen police chiefs, a representative from state Sen. Judy Schwank's office and about 60 residents, all there to discuss what can be done to ensure that the tragedies other communities in the U.S have experienced don't happen here.

While several members of City Council also attended, no one from the mayor's office or the city police department were on hand, something several community members noted with dismay.

But those who were there engaged in a mostly positive back-and-forth, sharing concerns and ideas. The overriding theme was that police and community members must get on the same page and work in tandem to help keep the streets safe for both the public and officers.

"We want you to be safe and go home each day, but we want to feel safe, too," community member Nate Rivera said.

One of the biggest ideas to come out of the night was the idea of community policing, and with that the need to have citizens more engaged in police work.

Police chiefs lamented the fact the efforts to hold citizens police academies struggle to find enough participants.

"With our community police academy, we couldn't get 10 people," said Muhlenberg Township Police Chief Eric Grunzig, adding that when the program first started in the 1990s it was hugely popular. Grunzig said he sees it as an overall disintegration of community spirit.

"We have neighbors that won't even talk to each other," he said.

An effort by an attendee to collect names of those in attendance who would take part in academies garnered 47 signatures, much to the delight of those in law enforcement.

But, as Exeter Township Police Chief Christopher Neidert pointed out, the people at the meeting weren't the ones who need to be reached.

"We're preaching to the choir because you're here," he said.

Snyder asked for the group's help in spreading the message to the wider community, saying it's important to have the public at large buy in.

Another hot topic was training. Several citizens discussed concerns that officers were not getting the training they need in de-escalation, cultural sensitivity and other key areas.

West Reading Chief Stephen Powell and Cumru Township Chief Madison Winchester both said that officers do receive training in those areas, but added there's always room for improvement.

Winchester said part of that effort in Cumru, where he was recently named chief, is to get public input. He said he's holding a community meeting to help "remove the cloak of secrecy" about how the police force operates and find out what concerns residents have.

And it's that type of effort that needs to continue, both law enforcement officials and community members agreed.

Again and again, the idea of improving communication was raised.

Wednesday night was a first step, it was said several times, but the conversation needs to continue. Both police officers and residents said they were willing to ensure that happens.

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