

**CRIMINAL JUSTICE
COORDINATING COUNCIL**

**CRIMINAL
JUSTICE
WEBINAR
SERIES:
Session
One**

**Community-
Inspired and
Targeted
Solutions to
Transform the
District's
Criminal Justice
System**

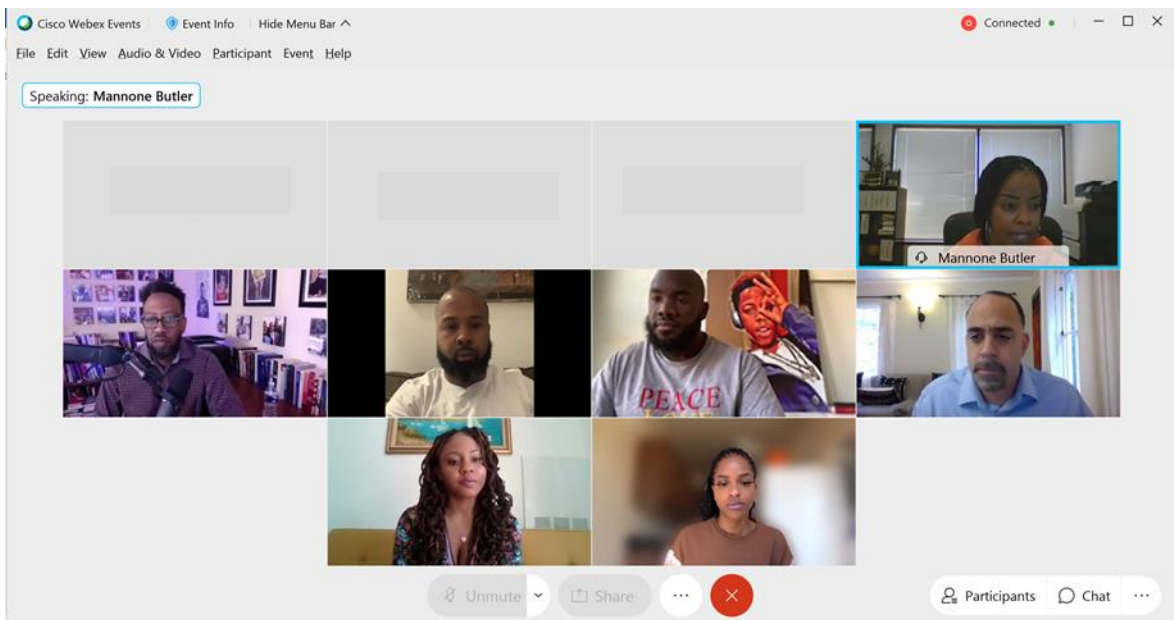
MARCH 10, 2021
11:00 AM - 1:00 PM
VIRTUAL EVENT



Background

On March 10, 2021, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) convened the first of its solutions-oriented series focused on reimagining the District’s justice system. Gun violence and related homicides, combined with the profound consequences of COVID-19 prompted the agency to focus on “Community-Inspired and Targeted Solutions Designed to Reimagine and Transform the Criminal Justice System in the District of Columbia” for its first session.

CJCC Executive Director Mannone Butler welcomed the webinar attendees, moderator, and panelists to the program. She offered that our nation, and the District in particular, has been besieged by gun violence and the added consequences of the pandemic, and emphasized that



the purpose of the webinar dialogue was to seize this moment to focus on what justice can look like in the District and to develop concrete solutions to structurally rooted problems, especially as they related to marginalized populations and justice system-involved persons. She introduced the moderator, David Muhammad, Executive Director of the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) and referenced his ongoing work across the District in support of violence intervention strategies and community-driven solutions to gun violence.

Mr. Muhammad stressed his commitment to working on approaches designed to promote criminal justice reform, with a specific focus on violence reduction and reinvesting in communities beset by gun violence, as well as dismantling community cynicism and distrust of criminal justice institutions and policies. Mr. Muhammad stated that the focus of the conversation was designed to identify strategies that would result in a reimagined criminal justice system across the District; he stressed how much passion and enthusiasm he believed the panelists would deliver to the discussion regarding transforming the criminal justice system, identifying solutions, and reinvesting in at-risk communities and individuals.

Panel Introduction

Mr. Muhammad introduced the following panelists:

- Darrell Gaston, Ward 8, Community Activist
- Rev. Tony Lee, Pastor, Community of Hope AME Church
- Charles King, Founder of Helping Others With Life (H.O.W.L.)
- Dionne Bussey-Reeder, Executive Director, Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative
- Natalie White, Youth Representative
- Kyla Woods, Youth Representative

In the lead-up to the discussion Mr. Muhammad stated that the conversation would be viewed through the lens of adult and youth criminal justice system concerns and would aim to address the needs and priorities of neighbors and community members. He asked each of the panelists to provide a brief background.

Mr. Charles King, Helping Others With Life (H.O.W.L.) introduced himself as a returned citizen committed to working as a Credible Messenger (CM) for DYRS. He typified his work as occurring in two different worlds: marginalized and endangered communities, and communities undergoing demographic shifts resulting in dislocated residents. Mr. King stated he is a resident of Ward 5, which encompasses the revitalized H Street Corridor, the transforming Hechinger Mall/Benning Road community, and the surrounding Montana public housing complex. He said his diverse community is defined by distinct social and economic disparities.

Darrell Gaston introduced himself as a lifelong resident of Ward 8, and a former Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner (ANC). He commented that his is an often-forgotten Ward, currently experiencing gentrification, with 60% of the land in the Ward owned by the federal government. Mr. Gaston expressed concern that as the neighborhood transforms, longstanding Black neighbors will be displaced as rising rents and home sales price them out. Further, those individuals do not possess the information to take advantage of first-time homeowner financing services offered through the Housing Purchase Assistance Program (HPAP), Manna, Inc., and the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America (NACA).

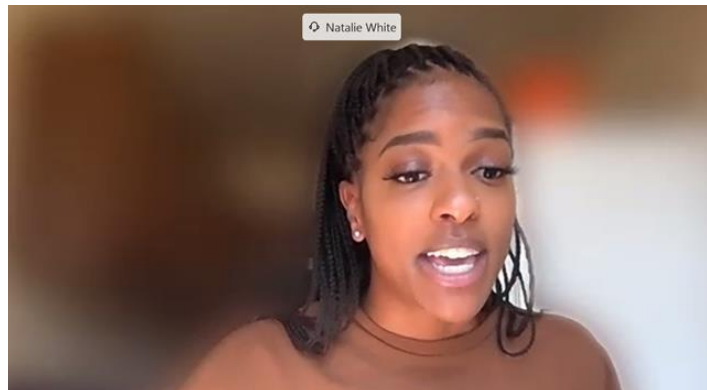


Kyla Woods introduced herself as a young adult leader who serves on the Youth Leaders in Action (YLA) committee. She previously lived in Ward 5 on a street surrounded by four liquor stores amidst serious social and economic inequities.

When she moved to Ward 3, she noticed distinct differences in policing methods, including the timeliness of police response rates in her current neighborhood compared to the delayed response by police in her previous neighborhood. She commented that the disparate response times in the respective communities were influenced by police perceptions and reactions based on racial and economic demographics.

Further, she added that there is a distinct need for School Resource Officers (SROs) to provide aid and assistance to youth who operate on the edge of criminal behavior and may require guidance. In her opinion, troubled youth would benefit from alternatives to severely penal responses to behavior that often leads to detention, resulting in them becoming system involved.

Natalie White introduced herself and commented that her grandparents and family previously lived in Georgetown and relocated as the community gentrified. She presently resides in Ward 4, where she notices greater diversity and more expensive homes, thus resulting in the displacement of lower income Black residents. She mentioned H Street and Benning Road as communities that have undergone transition or are currently experiencing gentrification.



Pastor Tony Lee mentioned he previously grew up in the District in Southeast, and currently ministers to DC and Maryland residents. He has previously worked with Sasha Bruce, the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute (MYLI), and has witnessed changes in DC life from both the positive and negative sides of the spectrum. He offered that the District represents a tale of two cities, the marginalized and displaced, and those able to enjoy the benefits the city has to offer. The pastor described his perspective on District residents perceiving where they live as "... going to hell in a hand basket" given hyper-gentrification, resident displacement, growing resentment and despair.

He emphasized that demands to reshape policing must address both current and anticipated residents who will comprise the new demographic based on race and class. He stressed proposed

changes must be equitable whereby all residents can expect and receive the same level of policing.

Pastor Lee commented that Reverend Willie Wilson, former pastor of Union Temple Baptist Church, decades ago encouraged Ward 8 residents to retain their homes because change was imminent. Pastor Lee offered there are strong forces at play designed to uproot residents, and any change in policing must be based on principles and practices rooted in equity.



Criminal Justice Reform

After the introductions, Mr. Muhammad posed a question regarding the direction and nature of calls for criminal justice system reform in relationship to gun violence and policing.

Mr. King started by highlighting the disparity in detention policies and demographics. He offered that in his work as a Credible Messenger and that during his prior incarceration, he noticed disproportionate ratios of people of color in the penal system. As a resident at Oak Hill Detention Center, he said he never witnessed one White resident, and emphasized the need for more proactive measures in responding to youth needs that are designed to engage them before they become a part of the system.

He commented on the distressing paradox of District youth who commit crimes being afforded opportunities to experience camping outings and recreational endeavors that achieving and well-behaved students who live in marginalized communities do not experience. In his opinion, youth offenders receive rewards and opportunities for their misbehavior. A more viable approach should include investing on the front-end, prior to youth entering the system, i.e., providing adequate housing, tutoring and mentoring for both boys and girls; operating on the premise that children who are secure and whose needs are met are less likely to engage in criminal and violent behavior.

Mr. King also suggested that applying the principles of restorative justice might serve as a holistic approach. Additionally, he mentioned there is a causal relationship between returning citizens becoming gainfully employed, paying taxes, and owning a home, and a reduction in the likelihood of recidivism. There is a need to expand the number of jobs targeted exclusively for returning citizens, although some currently exist.

Mr. King noted that community violence includes victims and perpetrators who know each other, and that children of gun violence perpetrators often replicate what they have experienced and

witnessed from their elders. Additionally, he commented that policing in high-crime and poor neighborhoods is driven by a lack of respect for residents and a belief that certain communities are predisposed to criminal behavior. Further, and very importantly, police maintain a permanent and unfriendly presence in some neighborhoods, and a person's place of residence often determines the nature and type of law enforcement response they receive. His final point on reform pertained to a family structural issue: at-risk youth require greater parental structure, particularly the influence of enduring and positive male influencers.

Darrell Gaston stated that current policing and criminal justice policies require a reassessment and an honest conversation among policymakers and residents. Specifically, initiatives need to be reviewed, including the \$48 million allocated to support the Cure the Streets initiative amid the District experiencing a 16-year high in homicides. He also stated that prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, a cycle of violence and despair existed across different communities, which has been exacerbated by the economic and health challenges presented by the pandemic. For example, a disproportionate number of homicides occurred in Wards 5, 7, and 8. In turn, the death tolls and injuries of primarily Black males have precipitated the need for a variety of trauma services across communities. Mr. Gaston offered that both persons and institutions must be held accountable for the realities of violence.

Additionally, evaluations must be conducted on how critical financial resources are allocated and deployed. He stressed that hundreds of millions of dollars being spent across the criminal justice system may not be providing a calculated and justifiable return on investment, because lives are not being positively transformed. Mr. Gaston commented that perhaps the resources spent could otherwise be used for more productive purposes. He commented that trauma experienced by youth must be accompanied by appropriate interventions because youth need to trust that adults and institutions will respond to their needs; patchwork efforts without purpose will be futile. He added that programs must respond to root causes that underlie poverty, and that intervention and outreach efforts must start early.

Natalie White offered that defunding the police does not equate to abolishing police functions or personnel, but rather using resources to engage people when they are young so that they do not experience growing up in fear of law enforcement. She also raised an important point that community members need to know where and what resources are available to them. Mr. Gaston agreed that in some cases, advocates for systemic change do not reside in the communities or understand the nature of the needs of the people they seek to help.

Pastor Lee commented that the current discussion is a rehash of prior conversations. Moreover, a broken criminal justice system cannot generate positive results. Fundamentally, everyone must appreciate there are inherent structural issues that must be addressed related to intergenerational poverty, incarceration, lack of employment, etc. The pastor called for concerted action that stemmed from both grassroot and grass-tops efforts, i.e., organizations, individuals, and institutions capable of effecting change, including courts, supervision, etc. In his opinion, social ecosystems and functions must be evaluated and adapted to meet the needs of

community members at risk. Further, the role of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was highlighted because the calls for social justice that echoed in protests nationally and locally focused on the fact that the criminal justice system is not only broken, but biased against people of color. Pastor Lee emphasized the need for data-driven methods with corresponding metrics that reveal the type and quality of results being generated.

In a segue before introducing Dionne Bussey-Reeder of the Far Southeast Collaborative, David Muhammad commented that the District has the benefit of vast resources, but these resources are not being effectively connected to the people, i.e., families and clients with the greatest need.

Upon being introduced, Ms. Bussey-Reeder outlined three points. Her first point highlighted the nexus between economic resources and the lack thereof in affected communities. She reflected on the ills in communities that experience violence and crime. For example, Ward 8 residents suffer from the lowest home ownership rates across all eight Wards. Ms. Bussey-Reeder stated that people making \$50-60K per year are unlikely to commit crimes. She further offered that it is a misnomer to think that poor people, if given money, would not spend it wisely. Her organization works with Thriving East of the River to provide community members with \$5,500 cash stipends, and invariably those funds are spent prudently. Second, she emphasized the importance of educating people and equipping them with the skills to compete in the future, including financial literacy. Third, home ownership is paramount because it serves as an equity accelerator.

In particular, she noted that policies implemented by a series of mayors contributed to economic marginalization in Ward 8, such that as investment in other Wards occurred, they prospered, but Ward 8 did not. Ms. Bussey-Reeder emphasized that she directs her staff to listen to what clients need rather than jumping to direct them what to do.

Organizational and Community Engagement

The second segment of the discussion addressed the work currently being done by panelists and their organizations.

Mr. King of Helping Others With Life offered that he performs work as a community-based organization (CBO) largely in Ward 5, where he mentors youth and engages in violence intervention and mediation endeavors. He works actively to support the needs of returning citizens, by connecting them to resources that can assist in their transition. One of his successful philanthropic efforts involved securing 100 bicycles to distribute to Ward 8 community youth.

He said his outreach efforts are well-received and respected wherever he goes because he works as a Credible Messenger and turned his life around after being removed from the community for 13 years. He offered that his story of achieving success and returning to help others gives him credibility with the populations he engages.

Darrell Gaston stated that all his work has been in Ward 8. He offered that he is an example of success to others in the Ward because he is the first member in his family to graduate from college and own a home. He cited realities that challenge transformation and neighborhood

revitalization, including zoning laws that enable liquor stores to abound and low home ownership by community members at the lower end of the economic and social ladder. Mr. Gaston founded The Gerald Project; his work involves mentoring and providing trauma care for victims and families affected by gun violence using 60 mental health service providers. One of his endeavors involves a program entitled “Get Fit Mentally,” which utilizes social media influencers and Black males to destigmatize mental illness and trauma treatment. The goal of the initiative is to encourage individuals to seek self-care for trauma and not be ashamed of expressing and dealing with their pain. As a product of the Woodland Terrace and Barry Farm communities, Darrell lamented that once they can afford to, residents depart their communities.

Kyla Woods stated that she is the beneficiary of a fellowship devoted to addressing homelessness, which she indicated is a multi-faceted problem. Kyla noted that DC is “resource rich, but coordination poor,” which may explain why and how juvenile homelessness exists to the extent it does. She commented on the nexus between juvenile justice practices and homelessness. Further, youth leaders must be incorporated into discussions aimed at developing solutions to these problems.

Natalie White commented that she is also a youth fellow and is employed by POWER, an organization that offers free HIV/AIDS testing. She engages in targeted outreach and noted the interconnection among poverty, homelessness, and juvenile justice.

Pastor Lee described the nature of transformational work performed by his church, which focuses on reducing violence, both in the community and the violence perpetrated by police against Black and Brown people. Church efforts also focus on education in school and after-school, in addition to educational advocacy related to the impact of HIV and AIDS. The pastor is also the founder and sits on the board of the Black Churches PAC, which devotes its work to supporting candidates committed to reducing mass incarceration of Black people, defending the right to vote, and promoting the equitable treatment of people of color.

Ms. Bussey-Reeder stated her organization started its work as an extension of the Child Family Services Agency (CFSA) and focused on child neglect matters. Over time the Collaborative’s mission has changed, and it administers 16 different programs that support families from the cradle to the grave. The Collaborative service model is predicated on a strength-based process, and it strives to meet clients where they are. It provides truancy programs at eight schools in Ward 8. Further, the organization performs child welfare coaching as opposed to casework, a distinction she emphasized. Additionally, their work supports families displaced from Barry Farm and is working with residents to assist them with home purchases once the complex renovations are completed. The Collaborative also manages and provides daily services for the Congress Heights Senior Wellness Center.

Two notable accomplishments of the Collaborative include owning the building where the Busboys and Poets Restaurant conducts business, as well as a building under construction to support administrative offices for 36 CFSA and 40 Collaborative staff. The organization operates one of five Family Success Centers in the District, in addition to managing four Peacebuilding and Violence



Interruption projects and a Credible Messenger Program in Ward 5. Ms. Bussey-Reeder praised the passion and commitment of the Credible Messengers. She indicated her organization started with seven employees and has grown to employ 70 persons, many of whom are former clients of the Collaborative.

Ms. Bussey-Reeder offered several tangible recommendations designed to support community engagement and revitalization including: developing expanded capacity among other CBOs and subcontracting projects to for-profit and non-profit organizations. Notably, 92% of Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative funding flows to community-based entities. Ms. Bussey-Reeder emphasized that the Collaborative’s casework is not subcontracted, but is administered by a licensed clinical director.

Program Summary

The consensus among the panelists revealed that a multi-pronged, community-inspired, and targeted solutions approach must be employed to transform the District’s criminal justice system. This should include proactive community engagement, utilizing data-driven survey metrics to quantify the success of client-focused services, incorporating recommendations for court innovation and diversion strategies, using data-driven metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of client-focused strategies, facilitating greater inter-agency collaboration on youth-centered programs, using data-driven metrics to support faith-based initiatives and collaboration, and ensuring that youth-oriented employment extends beyond the summer.

When asked how to build trust with families in need of an array of services, the panelists agreed it is critical to work with families and focus on their unique needs and employ a holistic approach, to connect families to community-based organizations, and to honor commitments.

Additional recommendations for increasing outreach included: expanding the use of youth advisory boards, incorporating youth involvement on the MPD Youth Council to effectuate change from within the system, and encouraging youth to join Leaders in Action.

David Muhammad summarized key points offered by the panelists and highlighted them including: acknowledging that DC is “resource rich, and coordination poor,” equitable opportunity must become a reality, lived experiences must be shared, penal measures should be employed in context, violence is politicized, resources must be directed to persons who need them, outreach must occur where people live and exist, and families need access to Department of Behavioral Health services.

CJCC Director Butler acknowledged the work of staff who organized the event and thanked agency partners for joining the program. She thanked the 102 persons signed in to view the webinar discussion and reiterated that next steps involved acting on the recommendations and solutions provided.

Criminal Justice Coordinating Council

CRIMINAL JUSTICE WEBINAR SERIES SESSION ONE: COMMUNITY-INSPIRED SOLUTIONS TO TRANSFORM THE DISTRICT'S CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

KEY ACTION ITEMS

Commit to addressing systemic barriers. Reimagining the justice system must include an objective and thorough redress of inequitable policies and practices.

Proactively engage communities through support and service provision to prevent their involvement in violence. Additional recommendations for increasing outreach included: expanding the use of youth advisory boards and encouraging youth to join Leaders in Action. Further, engaging and meeting people where they are based on their needs, and employing anti-racist policies and institutions.

Evaluate current violence prevention programs to determine whether they are effective. Build an expectation that programs will incorporate data collection strategies to quantify and qualify success. Enhance collaboration with the faith community by sharing data to inform actions. Employ data-based faith collaboration as opposed to "feel good" initiatives.

Expand diversion opportunities. Ideas included expanding mentoring approaches, applying the principles of Restorative Justice for persons who have harmed others or been harmed, and generally developing a better diversion system that allows people to turn their life around instead of entering the justice system.

Include the youth voice when developing community-oriented solutions. Engage youth before they reach the criminal justice system, support and expand youth leadership pathways, so more youth feel empowered to advocate for the changes that would be most helpful.

Provide year-round employment for youth. Additionally, establish more robust year-round employment opportunities that pay livable wages. Demonstrate how financial stability can improve future opportunities for self-sufficiency and mobility.

