

## **ROCHESTER'S COMMUNITY RESPONSE TEAM**

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The Community Response Team (CRT) is an initiative proposed by a group of community leaders in positions that provide opportunity to address systemic disparities. These volunteers organized under the auspices of Unite Rochester and worked to promote communication, trust, community education, and a positive, non-violent response to events or issues of race and racism. The CRT will also engage in activities to raise awareness about race and racism, and inspire a more inclusive and creative approach to solving community problems (*CRT mission statement summary*).

This case study tracks the evolution of Rochester's CRT. A spin-off of "Unite Rochester", CRT developed as a coalition of community leaders interested in building community trust and resilience and developing a plan to respond to potential civil unrest.

### **I. INITIATIVE – GROUNDED IN COLLABORATION**

CRT is a spin-off of "Unite Rochester", a collaborative effort spearheaded in 2012 by the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, which was designed to:

1. raise awareness about racial inequities;
2. help facilitate community conversations about race;
3. encourage more inclusive problem-solving and effect positive change.

Unite Rochester began after Jim Lawrence, the *Democrat and Chronicle's* editorial page editor, reached out to the Rochester Center for Dispute Settlement (The Center) to develop a collaborative effort around structural and systemic racism lingering in the greater Rochester

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area. The *Democrat and Chronicle's* opinion page captured the vision and mission of Unite Rochester:

**“For months now, dozens of leaders in our community have been volunteering their time to tackle the taxing problems associated with race and poverty... all of Unite Rochester volunteers recognize that we can’t go this way—two Rochesters divided by the haves and have nots.”<sup>1</sup> James F. Lawrence**

Unite Rochester charged the Center with creating a safe environment for a Greater Rochester listening tour on race and poverty. Unite Rochester’s listening tour was a forum for difficult conversations, an opportunity for residents “who normally wouldn’t be able to talk to one another to sit down and engage in a discussion about racial issues.”<sup>2</sup> To support candid participation the newspaper agreed not to report on what was said during listening sessions.

“One of the biggest pluses about the work that’s been done so far is the fact that we brought together people who don’t normally come together,” Lawrence said, pointing to examples of leaders from the city and suburbs, as well as Democrats and Republicans. After more than a year, more than 150 community members attended the listening tour. Elected and appointed civic leaders, organizational leaders representing educational institutions, businesses and not-for-profit agencies showed up to speak and listen to each other about issues of racism and poverty in the community.

In 2014, under the leadership of Unite Rochester Justice Committee Chair Cynthia Herriott-Sullivan, the group launched the Community Response Team. In 2015, the *Democrat and Chronicle* reported that the CRT would “...**work in collaboration with law enforcement or other government entities and communities to promote communication, trust, and positive, non-violent response to events or issues of community concern. It will also engage in activities to raise awareness about race and racism, and inspire a more inclusive and creative approach to solving community problems.**” Herriott-Sullivan stated that CRT was “...taking a pro-active initiative

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<sup>1</sup> James Lawrence, “The ‘Long, Hard Work of Uniting Rochester has Begun,” *Democrat and Chronicle* (June 24, 2018), <https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/opinion/2014/06/27/unite-rochester-coming-sunday/11451325/>.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Magnuson, “Diversity Can Bring Communities Together,” *Nieman Reports* (June 11, 2015), <http://niemanreports.org/articles/diversity-can-bring-communities-together/>.

to bridge communication between law enforcement ... and the community so we don't get to a point like we have in Ferguson," where divisive issues "have been brewing." Herriott-Sullivan was concerned that law enforcement and the community seemed to be growing further apart, rather than coming to an improved understanding.

## II. ASSEMBLE A PLANNING GROUP

Herriott-Sullivan, a local housing authority official and a former police officer, convened CRT with representatives from the Center, the judicial system, the county and the public defender.

Local Judge Craig Doran became "intrigued" about Unite Rochester because of its focus on the justice system. While the *Democrat and Chronicle* regularly criticized the justice system, Doran felt it was important to have constructive conversations about the justice system. Doran began his engagement with the CRT after a conversation about jury duty over coffee and donuts. From then, a relationship was formed and a level of trust was developed between a "conservative Republican and a liberal Democrat." Doran was convinced the Justice system had to be part of the conversation and part of the solution to the problem of bias and division in the Rochester community. Monroe County Sheriff, Patrick O'Flynn, "wanted to be up to speed regarding any opportunities to assess information, intervene... or support the community in public safety." According to O'Flynn, information derived from the clergy, neighborhood groups, and other citizens was very informative and helpful in support of public safety efforts for the whole community. The type of intervention the Monroe County Sheriff's office would provide depended on the type of crisis and specific needs. In partnership with the Rochester Police Department, the "flashpoint" could be identified so an appropriate conflict intervention could be identified.

The Monroe County Public Defender's office became involved after a couple of high-profile events in the Rochester community: the videotaping of a woman during a police arrest and the arrest of a pregnant woman. Public Defender Tim Donaher explained that the community leaders serving on the CRT's advisory committee enhanced the project's legitimacy.

As the advisory group developed, it considered how to engage diverse segments of the community. Liberti explained, "Those outspoken activist groups in our community should be part of this effort; whether

they have been invited or have self-excluded is unclear. No effort will be successful without engaging all groups. Bringing all people to the table will help to heal any real or perceived divisions on all sides. It is imperative we build cohesiveness... A fundamental way of building consensus is by engaging one's most outspoken opponent." O'Flynn agreed that that it would be hard to identify who should not be involved. Donaher noted that "lay" leaders and community groups ought to be identified and more integrally involved to be the responders when an incident occurs.

### III. TRAIN AND ASSESS READINESS

CRT leaders initially disagreed about the best method for assessing readiness. O'Flynn said, "The question is whether we have the mechanisms and are prepared prior to a crisis. Where does the CRT fit in? How do we determine when and if there is activation of the CRT? What are the safety and legal issues to be addressed? At what level do we activate and who does that involve?"

Some members suggested engaging in a simulation would help the CRT assess whether the community is ready to respond to a community crisis. Others thought the best way to assess readiness is to see how the community and the CRT respond to a divisive community incident. Herriott-Sullivan suggested dialogue: "...bringing stakeholders to the table and asking for their input on an assessment tool" would help determine Rochester's readiness.

In September 2017, CRT hosted a two-day event to (1) update the Rochester community on the progress of the CRT effort, and (2) train CRT members to respond to crisis and use an assessment tool to begin identifying whether the community is prepared to respond to a divisive event.

The first day was a public forum open to the community to learn about the Community Response Team efforts and progress. Two speakers were highlighted — one was Judge Peggy Hora from California, the other former chief, Andre Anderson, from Ferguson, MO. They spoke expertly and candidly about the issues and possibilities for appropriate responses by law enforcement and community members when the potential and actual threats of civil unrest occur.

The second day was a training workshop conducted for prospective CRT responders. Rochester's Center for Dispute Settlement conducted the training which included sessions on effective communication,

recognition of various values among cultural, ethnic, racial, economically diverse groups, anger management and its physiological impacts, effective and reflective listening, and implicit bias. The training also included various theories of conflict and the appropriate intervention for each conflict theory.

The 14 participants at the full-day workshop were invited to take a prototype of the Divided Community Project's Community Preparedness and Assessment Test. All 14 took a pre-workshop assessment; six took a post-workshop assessment. CPAT participants were asked questions related to the Rochester community's identity, whether Rochester has examined division within the community, how Rochester deals constructively with division, whether the community is ready to deal with volatile situations, among other issues.

Shockingly and quite overwhelmingly, survey participants responded that the following areas need "more focus and attention":

- Does the community deal constructively with division when compared to other communities?
- How does the community deal constructively with division from a historical perspective?
- Is the community ready to deal with volatile situations stemming from community division?
- In the context of the Community's readiness to deal with volatile situations, are officials trained to frame issues raised during crisis?
- Does the community have an early warning system to communicate about developing concerns?

While the prospective responders engaged in a one-day training, Donaher explained that one day is "wholly inadequate for such an undertaking." Training "should be longer and more comprehensive to prepare CRT members to properly address crisis situations."

#### **IV. PLANNING HURDLES**

CRT leaders developed draft protocols that illustrated how and when CRT would engage in the Rochester community. The draft protocols included provisions defining CRT membership, CRT's advisory board, CRT's officers (including a team coordinator, assistant team coordinator, secretary, training coordinator, communications specialist), training requirements, protocol for activation of the CRT in the event of potential

community concerns or potential civil unrest, identification of CRT member activities, protocol for confidentiality and conflicts of interest, and after-action reporting. The protocols were neither edited nor finalized, and are not publicly available.

Initially there was an expectation that a coordinator would provide direction to the project and make decisions. CRT Steering Committee members do not have the bandwidth to personally manage the day to day development, outreach, recruitment, training and other logistic activities for managing an effective CRT. Steering Committee members were generally in agreement that their role would be to serve as community leaders supportive of boots-on-the-ground CRT volunteer team members.

It is clear that developing a team of respected community volunteers, trained and prepared to respond to critical community events, would require leadership and coordination by a dedicated, highly respected person or persons intimately familiar with the Rochester/Monroe County area. The CRT staff, working under the guidance of the Steering Committee, would be charged with conducting extensive public outreach to community groups; developing and providing training for the volunteers; developing protocols for notification and activation of CRT volunteer members; facilitating regularly scheduled Steering Committee and Volunteer Responders meetings; and staying abreast of developments in the community resiliency building field.

Donaher explained, “If the CRT is going to be successful, it must have a dedicated person, community buy-in, and involvement of community organizations and the faith community.” Liberti agreed that funding is necessary in order to coordinate, manage, and oversee the CRT project.

Indeed, the CRT’s work has stalled. CRT leaders have not had formal conversations since September 2017. There appears to be a desire to strengthen community resiliency, perhaps through the development and implementation of a Community Response Team, or other means. The CRT itself may be a good start in preparing to build community resiliency, but CRT efforts must be clearly identified and supported. Doran said very plainly that “communication, trust and relationship building” are integral. It is also clear there are critical areas of preparedness that need further exploration and work. Liberti expressed optimism that a local university – perhaps supplemented with community

grant funding – will provide resources to activate, organize, and train CRT leaders and volunteers.

## **V. APPENDIX – SUMMARY OF DRAFT CRT BYLAWS**

Draft CRT bylaws were circulated in 2016, but are not publicly available.

### **Mission:**

The Community Response Team (CRT) is a group of volunteers organized under the auspices of Unite Rochester that works in collaboration with law enforcement or other government entities and communities to promote communication, trust, community education, and a positive, non-violent response to events or issues of race and racism. The CRT will also engage in activities to raise awareness about race and racism, and inspire a more inclusive and creative approach to solving community problems.

### **Specific activities summarized:**

- Responds to rumors and crisis in the community;
- Provides direct intervenors between law enforcement and community;
- Assists with educating the community and facilitating dialogues to enhance communication among and between community, law enforcement and other governmental entities.

### **Membership summarized:**

- Diversity based on age (18 years of age and older), race, gender, ethnicity, culture and socio-economic backgrounds.
- Willingness to serve the community for at least three years, maintain confidentiality, remain objective and participate in meetings and activities of CRT.

### **Advisory Board:**

- Sets policy and procedure, establishes guidelines, assesses operations, serves as resource.
- Not more than five members.

**CRT officers** (it was important to the CRT that the team leader is a community member in good standing and not a political leader):

- Team coordinator (serves as presiding president)
- Assistant team coordinator
- Secretary
- Training coordinator
- Communication specialist
- Training consisting of mediation, conciliation, crisis intervention, community issues, criminal justice system, police policies and community service.

**Three levels of activation:**

- Level 1 - Civil disorder and/or unrest has occurred or is imminent. After any activation a review will be conducted with advisory board and CRT members. Emphasis is placed on confidentiality and conflicts of interest.
- Level 2 - Utilized in situations where credible information suggests a concern may rise to the level of disorder. The focus would be on preventions.
- Level 3 - Community concern raised, but not likely to result in civil unrest.