



# 2021 Community Policing Working Group Report



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Message from Metropolitan Police Department

## Chief Robert J. Contee, III



Robert J. Contee, III  
Chief, Metropolitan Police Department



While MPD has many priorities, none of them are possible to achieve without our community. As the Chief of Police of the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia (MPD), one of my strategic goals for the department is meaningful officer engagement with the communities we serve. While this is our third Community Policing Working Group report, this engagement was different than past reports. With the expertise of Dr. Muhammed, Founding Director of Howard University's Policing Inside Out (PIO) program, MPD jointly hosted a series of community-listening sessions over the past year. Due to the Public Health Emergency, the majority of the sessions were conducted virtually, which allowed a broad number of individuals to engage.

I was excited to listen to the voices of our community members as they discussed what they wanted to see the police do and not do in their communities. The stories, experiences, and perspectives shared in these working group sessions mirrored many other conversations I was having in various parts of the city, with diverse communities as I assumed the role of Chief of Police. Recognizing the importance of community engagement and building and maintaining positive police-community relationships and partnerships, these listening sessions have helped shape the future trajectory of MPD.

Throughout each of the sessions, I had the opportunity to listen to a diverse group of perspectives comprised of college students, PIO alumni, community members from all wards of the city, stakeholders, and my officers about a wide range of topics. Residents from all eight wards shared that better youth engagement is critical for progress. Ideas ranged from a youth resource website to a citywide youth summit. My team has already made great strides in this arena, having hosted a youth summit at Eastern High School in December 2021 and we have plans for subsequent events, for example.

My perspective is that consistent, positive interactions help build strong relationships, which builds trust. Once trust is established and honest conversations can routinely be had, strong partnerships can form. These partnerships lead to greater information sharing and safer communities – a shared goal between our community and MPD. While MPD is often called to serve in challenging and tense circumstances, it is my expectation that every MPD officer create a positive impression with community members through each interaction.

I was humbled and inspired to listen to the community voices of those who are both hopeful and demand meaningful change. This means that MPD will need to continue to grow and develop, and we

will do so with many community partners. Admittedly, there is still work to be done, but as a proud native Washingtonian, I am pleased with the department's progress and look forward to continuing to grow and nurture our partnership with the community. I'm confident that MPD is moving in the right direction and appreciate the work of Howard University in leading this Community Policing Working Group listening sessions and report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert J. Contee III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the last name "Contee" being more prominent.

Robert J. Contee III  
Chief of Police  
Metropolitan Police Department

*Letter from Bahiyyah M. Muhammad, PhD*

To Police Departments and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs):

The virtual listening sessions were the result of a long-term partnering relationship with the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and Howard University. This partnership allowed for faculty and students of color to lead and engage with community members on multiple occasions throughout the year. Research has identified the importance of race, especially in engagements with police and communities of color. Therefore, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)/HBCUs should be at the forefront of the discussion. Building a leadership model through your local HBCUs will allow for the community engagement and dialogue to remain ongoing. Oftentimes, the dialogue between community and law enforcement ends after the allotted time for the project. The work of building strong community-police relations is a process that takes time and dedication from all involved.

Even though COVID-19 protocols required each of the sessions to be held virtually, this did not result in less engagement. During each of the evening sessions, there were at least 100 District residents in attendance. Most participants were in virtual attendance until the end of the session. Colleges/Universities and police departments should not be discouraged by working with the community virtually. Although face-to-face engagement is ideal, innovative online programming should be considered as a temporary option.

These sessions were attended by PIO alumni, community stakeholders, MPD officers, and HBCU students from both Howard University (HU) and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), the two HBCUs in the nation's capital. In learning from this model, cities/states can benefit from pooling their collective community engagements to forge extensive and lasting relationships with community. HBCUs are known to be the anchor universities who have served as first-responders to the needs of those in their communities, across the nation, and around the world.

This report highlights the process and outcome of these listening sessions and sheds light on how this can be used as a national model for minority community-police relations.

Bahiyyah M. Muhammad, PhD  
Associate Professor of Criminology  
Howard University

## INTRODUCTION

The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) Community Policing Working Group (“Working Group”) was first convened in the summer of 2017, pursuant to the Neighborhood Engagement Achieve Results (NEAR) Amendment Act of 2016.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 2019, the second Working Group convened to review progress on the recommendations made by the first Working Group and to propose additional recommendations.<sup>2</sup>

For the third session of the Working Group, MPD partnered with Howard University (HU) to hold a series of community listening sessions. These sessions were developed based on prior successful community engagement programming and expanded upon MPD’s existing partnership with Howard University’s *Policing Inside Out* (PIO) program. MPD’s involvement in this effort also demonstrated the agency’s commitment to community engagement through building and maintaining positive police-community relationships.

### ***POLICING INSIDE OUT***

The traditional Policing Inside Out program encompasses a semester-long academic course, meeting once a week, attended by 10 to 15 students representing the school or community and an equal number of police personnel. These students discuss contemporary policing and social justice issues, work towards facilitating citizen-police dialogue to improve trust, tackle difficult issues such as use of force or police stops, and enhance cross-cultural knowledge.

Over the years, PIO has included MPD officers and has allowed for robust discussion among law enforcement, students, and the community—helping break barriers and build collaboration between all parties. Through PIO, real dialogue has led to change for MPD, whose officers and community members were among the first cohort to participate in a seminar centered at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). This partnership led to MPD members participating in a similar training session that included a visit to NMAAHC, and it has been incorporated into recruit training for all new MPD officers. This partnership is working together to bring real transformation in police-community relations.

<sup>1</sup> D.C. Law 21-125; D.C. Official Code § 5-132.32 (effective June 30, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> For the 2019 Report of the MPD Community Policing Working Group, visit: [https://mpdc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mpdc/publication/attachments/2019%20Community%20Policing%20Working%20Group%20Report\\_12%2019%2019.pdf](https://mpdc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mpdc/publication/attachments/2019%20Community%20Policing%20Working%20Group%20Report_12%2019%2019.pdf).

## LISTENING SESSION PROCESS

Five listening sessions and a final “close out” session were held over the course of the spring and summer of 2021. These sessions were hosted by MPD and Howard University with leadership contributions from Dr. Bahiyyah M. Muhammad, the Founding Director of Policing Inside Out, and her consulting company. The goal of the sessions was to bring together community members, students, academics, and MPD officers to discuss community policing across the city. Members of the public were invited through social media, community based-advertisements, and word-of-mouth.

The goals and objectives of this program were closely aligned with the neighborhood engagement models that seek to gain better understanding of the ongoing needs of the community. This innovative community engagement program was adopted as a model to center the experiences and narratives of the community. Specifically, participants representing different generations, neighborhoods, and communities were given the opportunity to explain their lived experiences and provide guidance and recommendations for session topics to be explored during subsequent listening sessions.

It was important to the Working Group to hear from residents living in each of the wards in the District. This virtual and open floor methodology was implemented to rid participants of making assumptions about experiences and expectations with MPD. Specifically, the voices of those living and/or working in the city were respected, highlighted, and used to underline the similarities and differences among ward-specific expectations. During all listening sessions, participants were broken into virtual breakout rooms by ward to allow each ward to be represented and heard.

PIO-trained instructors, HU students, and PIO program alumni facilitated each listening session. In addition, HU assisted MPD in recruiting a diverse array of voices for each session, ensuring MPD heard perspectives from members of the community who may not regularly interact with law enforcement. These sessions worked to center critical perspectives and allow for all voices to be heard, understood, and respected.

Finally, each of the listening sessions implemented “Norms of Engagement” to create and maintain a safe space throughout the entire process. This was accomplished by sharing rules at the start of each session, and again during the start of dialogue in each of the individual breakout rooms.

## ***NORMS OF ENGAGEMENT***

**Listen to understand.** Everyone was invited for a reason. Actively listen to others and engage with their perspective. Avoid interrupting or distracting with your voice, chat, or expressions.

**Speak your personal truths.** No one is just one thing. Each of us has identities and experiences that go beyond a single group, label, profession, or institutional affiliation. Please speak from your personal perspective and listen for others.

**Focus on productive discussion.** We should be critical about policies and practices as we try to build towards a new vision for police engagement. This is not a space for criticism or personal attacks on workshop participants.

**Respect the process.** Please respect the integrity of the process and each other, particularly when it comes with sharing in-progress ideas or feelings beyond this group. The final day is for public sharing.

**Use (at least) your first name in your Zoom profile.** Feel free to add pronouns to your Zoom name if you would like.

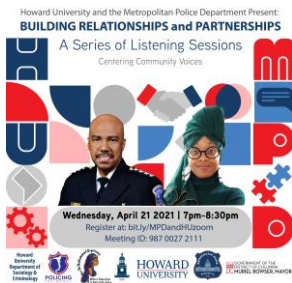
**Keep your camera on when possible.** If this is not possible, we trust your reasons. Feel free to use a background, as long as it doesn't create a distraction. We may turn off cameras if we encounter bandwidth challenges.

**Mute your microphone when you're not speaking.** Drop questions in the chat at any time. We will have someone collect and organize questions for each discussion. Keep in mind that chat defaults to send to everyone in the Zoom.



# LISTENING SESSION SUMMARIES

Five virtual listening sessions and a final “close out” session were held over the spring and summer of 2021. Below is a summary of each session’s focus and discussion points. For each session, quotes from various participants, including officers, students, and community members, have been included (although not attributed to individuals) to provide a better sense of the discussions.



## Session 1: Building Relationships and Partnerships (April 21, 2021)

The first listening session served as the virtual kickoff event. It was curated to establish an environment that could accommodate input from participants and be restructured to accommodate any recommendations from the community. During the initial engagement, the facilitators highlighted the roles of all the participants involved in the partnership. This included Howard University faculty, students, staff, and Metropolitan Police Department leadership, officers, cadets, interns, and staff. Most importantly, the first session highlighted the importance of the District of Columbia community participating in the sessions.

After the greeting, audience members were asked to type in the chat how they were doing today. This component of the session was geared to acknowledge the feelings that people were bringing into the Zoom space.

During the first listening session, Dr. Muhammad started the series with a “get off your chest” conversation. The concept was to start by allowing everyone the equal opportunity to share any and everything, especially issues generating emotional discontentment. The series kickoff was strategically created to be a space for open dialogue to listen to specific needs or issues regarding policing in all wards. Rather than being a formal session, the facilitator encouraged all participants, including MPD stakeholders, to engage in “real talk” dialogue.

This format allowed new conversations to be started. One of the specific objectives of this session was to identify ward specific needs and issues. The goal was to hear from those who are directly impacted within their wards. During this kickoff session, participants also heard directly from the Police Chief.

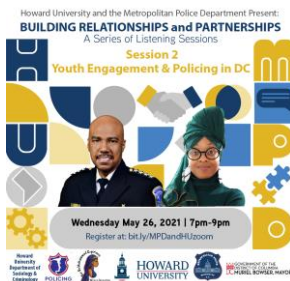
Chief Contee passionately spoke to the group, explaining how proud he is to be a native Washingtonian and that, rather than working behind closed doors, he intends to be open and transparent about the work that he is doing. Participants were then assigned to ward-specific breakout rooms, facilitated by students, to discuss and answer the question, **“What are the major concerns around policing in your ward?”**.

Across multiple wards, one common theme was that participants recognize the need for the police, but also see value in other government and community agencies to address social issues. Many participants also discussed their desire for more casual interactions with officers in their neighborhoods, and that they want to get to know the officers who work in their area to address concerns and brainstorm solutions.

*"The police aren't the answer for everything...we need to get other entities, other social services, other government programs to be able to be empowered."*

*"The resounding theme from Ward 4 residents were that the community wants to engage with the police. They have been provided the opportunity to do so in community meetings but there was feedback that often white shirts show up rather than blue shirts, and they really want to engage with frontline patrol officers."*

*Most people said that they've had positive experiences with police in school and their children are having positive experiences with police in school. So, the request isn't so much that we want to get rid of the police in school, but we need to fix the ratios of security guards to students versus counselors to students."*



## Session 2: Youth Engagement and Policing in DC (May 26, 2021)

The second session began with an introduction from Assistant Chief Chanel Dickerson of the Youth and Family Engagement Bureau (YFEB). She explained the YFEB's mission and highlighted the importance of police and community working together to provide services to at-risk youth. Participants then viewed and discussed a viral video of three boys being stopped and patted down by MPD officers. After the video, the participants heard from Officer Xavier Leake, a native Washingtonian, who spoke about his journey of becoming an MPD cadet and an officer. During breakout sessions, participants were asked the following questions: **"What are your experiences with youth in your specific ward?"** and **"How can we work to maintain the humanity of young individuals in your specific wards?"**

Across wards, multiple participants agreed that there is a need for more afterschool and weekend programs for youth, in addition to the opportunity for MPD to be more engaged with youth outside of school and beyond responding to 911 calls. There was also discussion regarding what can be done to improve how officers view young people and how to prevent officers from stigmatizing young people as delinquent.

*"In my neighborhood, I'm not afraid to walk my neighborhood because of the police; I'm afraid to walk my neighborhood because of the bad actors. And a lot of people in the community know who these actors are and are afraid to come forward."*

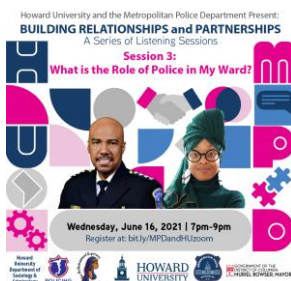
*"The officers in my neighborhood ... they used to know my name. I know it's a different time now...but if we can [get] back to those basics, I feel like a bridge can be [built] between our community and the police."*

*"This conversation continues to be, 'How can we normalize relationships? How can we build relationships?' Instead of 'Why? Why do these relationships need to exist?'"*

*"We're asking MPD to see our youth as the scientists, as the attorneys, when they interact with any of them wherever they are, just changing the perspective across MPD. If you're approaching a youth and you see them as a scientist, then your whole conversation will be different."*

*"We don't see police out and about, even in Ward 3 or 4. They're in their cars. There is a need for them to walk around and to interact with the young people. Walk casually by the basketball court, not when somebody calls and says that there is a problem."*

*"When we want to fight crime, there's no better ally than a youth in community."*



### Session 3: What Is the Role of Police in My Ward? (June 16, 2021)

The third session began with Dr. Muhammad making it clear that her goal of this session was to put the voices of young people at the forefront of the conversation. A panel of young people, all of whom attended DC Public Schools, discussed their views on School Resource Officers and also their experiences with MPD officers outside of school. After listening to the youth panelists, participants discussed with their respective ward members two questions: **"How does your personal perspective compare to what it is that you heard from the youth panel today?"** and **"What are the top three roles of police in your ward?"**

Participants identified many positive and long-lasting relationships with School Resource Officers, but stated that those same relationships are not always present with officers on the street. This led to a conversation about how officers on patrol can foster meaningful relationships while still doing their job, responding to 911 calls, and maintaining public safety.

*"Gradually, over time, there was a police officer who was stationed at our school, Officer Epps, who I still speak to this day, He built a relationship with all of us. And that was something he sought out...he was there to make sure that he knew us and that if we needed something from him that we could come to him and if it was in his wheelhouse, he would get it done for us."*

*"We want to hear officers initiating conversation with a simple 'good morning.' We want officers to be approachable and comfortable with our youth and try to bridge the lack of trust and work on building long term relationships."*



## Session 4: Police Accountability, Transparency, and Reimagining Training (July 21, 2021)

The focus on Session 4 was police accountability, transparency, and training. Chief Contee kicked off the session by speaking about new initiatives within MPD such as the Community Focused Patrol Unit and new training for MPD's Gun Recovery Unit (now part of the Violent Crime Suppression Division) and crime suppression teams. After a brief discussion regarding the police "blue wall of silence," and perceptions shared by members of the Community the conversation pivoted and MPD Commander Ralph Ennis and Officer Stephen Benson were introduced to talk about their professional experience and MPD training.

The group listened to several domestic violence-related scenarios. The officers explained how the 911 system works and stressed the importance of providing critical details to 911 call takers that in turn will provide first responders insight on how to best dispatch the most appropriate resources. Participants then joined their ward groups where they discussed accountability and transparency. In the breakout groups, participants were specifically asked to discuss: **"Why are transparency and accountability important?" "Who should be transparent?" "What issues in your ward do you want more transparency surrounding?" and "How do you think we can achieve transparency?"**

Some community members shared personal stories about filing complaints against the police. One said that she was satisfied that the officer received additional training; another was pleased that the officer apologized for their actions. Many participants also said they want the department to share more information regarding use of force, and that – in general – the public should have a greater voice in shaping the mission and goals of the department.

*"Police officers should be transparent. Individuals who employ the police officers should be transparent, and they should especially be transparent about the use of guns."*

*"It's important to let the people know what the police are doing...if they are transparent in the work that they do then it could perhaps bring them closer together with the community."*

*"Officers should be in schools. It's not that they're there for punitive reasons, but they're there to build relationships and become engaged with young people. They're a role model to the students."*



## Session 5: Building Relationships and Partnerships (August 4, 2021)

Following four sessions focused on dialogue about community policing in DC, Session 5 was a call for action. Participants reflected on what they learned over previous sessions and then discussed how they could work as a team to move forward and turn the input from earlier discussions into tangible results. During reflection, several participants stated that they were grateful to be able to hear different perspectives from different wards across the city and think about where the wards have similar goals but also where they differ. During breakout sessions, participants were asked **"What does teamwork look like in your ward?"** and **"How can youth be involved in real ways?"**

Participants from different wards agreed on the importance of increasing communication so that community members can discuss issues and propose solutions. Sometimes solutions may involve MPD, but oftentimes, other issues can be solved by other government agencies and community organizations. Nearly all wards agreed that youth engagement is critical for progress. Proposed ideas ranged from a youth resource website to a citywide youth summit. Chief Contee closed out the final session by recognizing how these meetings have provided an opportunity for community members to voice their concerns and disagreements, and affirming his confidence that MPD and the community are moving in the right direction toward meaningful community relations.

*"My takeaway from these sessions has really been to strategically think about how I need to position the agency to align with the goals and values of the communities that we serve."*

*"You have a chief of police who's committed to doing things differently, looking at things. You have an engaged community. And when you have all of us working together, I think it's a unique opportunity for us to really make some positive strides in the direction of where we need to go to see safer communities all across the District of Columbia."*

*"We need to make sure we engage our youth at every meeting and in every partnership that we're developing. I know what's happening in Ward 8 because I go to meetings but I do not see our youth, and we're talking about things that affect them but we don't hear their voices."*

*"If we want to offer our community members resources, what are those resources? Let's start by providing a comprehensive list of what are the resources in our neighborhoods that we can post on ListSrvs."*

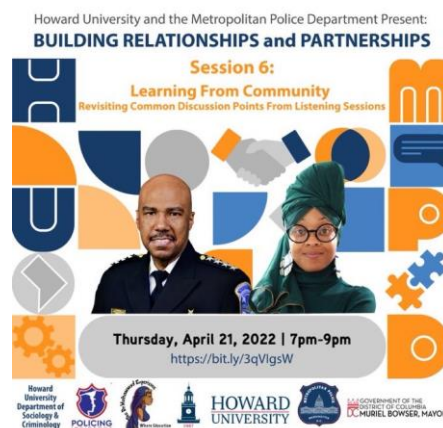
*"An officer said the term 'alongside' resonates. And in his words, working alongside, not 'I'm coming to tell you or 'you're coming to tell me.' Working alongside each other to get the work done, that's what teamwork looks like in Wards 3 and 4."*

*"One major takeaway of these sessions is clear: the investment in the youth, and...it doesn't matter if you got on a uniform or if you got on a bow tie...one of the things that we all agree on is the investment in the youth."*

*"We might not all be 100% in agreement on everything, but can we at least agree that we're all heading in the same direction?"*

## Session 6: Close Out (April 21, 2022)

Session 6 engaged community members in a wrap up session, touching on key takeaways from the previous sessions over the past year. Recommendations from community members were discussed and participants were provided with an open floor to dialogue and share their ward specific feedback. All community members who participated in the listening sessions will receive a digital copy of the final report with recommendations. Next steps will be shared, and future endeavors discussed.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following list of recommendations was created based on common discussion points from the six sessions. Many of these recommendations focus on increasing police interaction with the community, which is in stark contrast to recommendations and efforts from other groups to limit police interaction. This highlights the difficult task of balancing often competing goals for policing.

1. MPD should create a resource guide for non-law enforcement partners or leverage other DC Government partners to develop such an item. MPD members should be trained on how to provide this information to the community.
2. MPD should develop a method for MPD, government agencies, and community groups to systematically work together on addressing neighborhood quality of life issues.
3. MPD should encourage officers to proactively engage community members on a casual basis, out of cars and in-person, not just when responding to 911 calls.
4. MPD should provide a space for community members to discuss concerns and ideas with the officers and officials that patrol and lead their neighborhoods and build meaningful relationships.
5. MPD should train officers on how to engage young people and identify best practices for interacting with youth both during community engagement and during investigations.
6. Resources should be allocated to create more space for positive interactions between the police and young people. Participants' ideas ranged from pickup after school sports games to a citywide youth summit.
7. MPD should develop a panel of young people to advise MPD leadership on the perspectives of young people in the District, and their relationship with and perception of MPD.
8. School resource officers should collaborate with patrol officers to train them on best practices for developing meaningful relationships with young people and acting as a positive mentor and role model.
9. When officers have to conduct stops for criminal investigations, especially when stopping young people, officers should be respectful, communicative, and explain the reason for the stop.
10. When addressing complaints against police officers, the Department should be focused on the officer understanding what they did wrong. Residents who file a complaint should hear back in a timely fashion regarding its progress.
11. MPD should increase transparency by making stop and use of force data more easily accessible to the public.

12. MPD should explore ideas to increase public trust in calling 911 and cooperating as witnesses to crimes, particularly violent crimes.
13. MPD should host more community engagement sessions in partnership with local HBCUs (Howard University and the University of the District of Columbia).

### **Initial Response**

MPD's work aligns with many of the recommendations from the group. Chief Contee is committed to improving service to and relations with youth in the District. MPD places great priority and emphasis to ensure all of our employees treat members of the public, including those that are arrested, with dignity and respect. Such actions build trust and credibility within the community. In 2021, the Chief relaunched a Youth Advisory Council to hear directly from young people in the District on issues that matter to them. On December 4, 2021, MPD also held a Youth Summit to encourage more youth to talk with the Chief. MPD will also launch a course for all sworn members of the Department on adolescent development, racial equity, and policing later in 2022. The training is being developed by a workgroup composed of the Juvenile Justice Clinic and Initiative at Georgetown Law, other Georgetown University staff, the Office of the Attorney General, and MPD.

In addition to striving to build more understanding between youth and police, MPD is also working to give more opportunities to District youth to have a career in public service, while having more DC residents serving in our communities. The Cadet Program provides participants with 60 college credits at no cost, a competitive salary and benefits package, and helps develop leadership skills. Mayor Bowser and Chief Contee, a former MPD cadet, have expanded MPD's Cadet Program to provide opportunities for high school students (and community members up to those 24 years old) to work for the Department part-time, before becoming full-time cadets after graduation. Information about the program is available at [joinMPD.dc.gov](https://joinMPD.dc.gov).

MPD also recognizes that transparency is critical to community trust and is working to improve access to data on police work. Use of force and police stop data are available to the public on the MPD web site ([mpdc.dc.gov/opendata](https://mpdc.dc.gov/opendata)), along with a variety of other data such as juvenile and adult arrests, and hate crimes. The use of force data was first posted in February 2022, and currently includes 2020 data. Data for 2021 will be posted later this year. Substantial initiatives, such as the Police Body-Worn Camera Program, help provide visibility into officer's actions while interacting with members of the community and ensure that merits of any complaints about officers can be thoroughly adjudicated.

MPD agrees with recommendations that law enforcement responses are not the only response to a range of scenarios that involve some infractions of our laws. While the group directed the recommendations at MPD, members of our community should be assured that MPD participates in, but does not necessarily lead, numerous multi-agency efforts to prevent crime through more effective delivery of services. MPD will continue to review and implement recommendations as appropriate and will provide updates in the future.