

Mayor Myrick posted the following on Facebook soon after the DOJ – CRS Trainings.

Last week, a steady stream of local residents could be spotted making their way to the City Police Department, not leaving until nearly four hours later.

They weren't showing up to report crimes or file complaints. This group of nearly 40 community stakeholders were volunteering to participate in a special federal anti-racial profile training program for Ithaca Police Department officers.

The special training program was offered and facilitated by the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Relations Services (DOJ/CRS).

The program reviews the history and concept of profiling by police in addressing criminal activity. In the workshops, participants explored the complexities of using race as a factor in police investigations. Through a series of videotape and role playing exercises, law enforcement and community members view the effects of racial profiling on communities, as well as ways to defuse racial profiling allegations whenever they arise.

With few exceptions, every IPD officer participated in the 4-hour training – but they were not alone because DOJ/CRS workshops are specially designed to engage police officers and community members together in a discussion about race and community policing. Officers agreed to participate in the dialogue out of uniform in order to encourage a more comfortable conversation. Refreshments for each session were provided by Tompkins County Human Rights Commission.

“The training brought together police officers and members of the community for open and constructive dialogue,” Ithaca Police Chief John Barber said, “having continued conversations are important for building better relationships between the police and the community we serve.”

It wasn't the first visit that Linda Ortiz, DOJ Conciliator, made to Ithaca in the last few weeks.

Shortly after the August 10th incident involving the IPD and local youths of color, Karen Baer, Director of the Office of Human Rights, provided Linda Ortiz with local press stories covering community reaction to the event. Linda and Karen had worked previously in Geneva, New York after that community was forced to come to terms with the aftermath of a shooting death of an unarmed African-American man by a Geneva police officer in 2012.

“My experience in working with the DOJ/CRS in Geneva was a very positive one – in particular the valuable community dialogue-based racial profiling and diversity training that was offered to every Geneva police officer,” Karen Baer admitted. “My hope was that the City of Ithaca and the IPD would also find value in this type of program. So I invited Linda to get involved.”

In a matter of weeks, Linda travelled to Ithaca to explore training possibilities with myself and Chief John Barber, and we were both excited about DOJ program.

In order to add value to the dialogue-based training, I agreed to provide the DOJ with a diverse list of community stakeholders from which the DOJ could invite an adequate number for each session. And since the community perceived the underlying police incident to be related to race and youth, my list pulled heavily from groups such as Community Leaders of Color (CLOC), the Tompkins County Human Rights Commission, and the Community Policing Board -- including the Ithaca Youth Council and other community/policing stakeholders.

As a gesture, Chief Barber extended an invitation to representatives of the Tompkins County Sheriff's Office and Cornell Police to take advantage of the DOJ program.

This anti-racial profiling training will greatly enhance the ability of the Ithaca Police Department to deliver high quality, community oriented services. Along with other measures - like the addition of body cameras on each officer, the opening of a community satellite office on the west end and the creation of a Community Action Team - will turn an already professional and effective department into a national model for community engagement.