

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

10/2/2010

Third Judicial District Equal Justice
Committee – Community Dialogue

This was the first Community Dialogue Session conducted by the Third Judicial District Equal Justice Committee. The session was held at the Rochester Math & Science Academy, 415 SW 16th Street, Rochester, MN, from 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Community Dialogue

THIRD JUDICIAL DISTRICT REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Third Judicial District Equal Justice Committee (EJC) sponsored this Community Dialogue as part of its efforts to educate identifiable minority populations on the purpose and operation of the courts. The Community Dialogue was also held to listen to the perspective of local minority populations on the courts and learn what they believe the court can do better with respect to understanding minority populations.

This first dialogue session was held in Olmsted County, which is home to a large Somali population. In working with a member of the Somali community who is also employed by the District as an interpreter, the local Somali school – Rochester Math & Science Academy – was chosen as the venue for the meeting. Members of the Somali community were invited to attend through postings of flyers at locations in the Rochester area frequented by the Somali community – the school, the mosque, and local Somali-run businesses. The session was also advertised on the local cable television channel. Approximately 40 members of the Somali community attended the session, with eight members of the EJC and three Olmsted County judges facilitating the dialogues.

Community Dialogue Plan

The Community Dialogue Plan was developed by a planning subcommittee of the Judicial Branch's Racial Fairness Committee. The Plan provides a template for the Racial Fairness Committee and each Judicial District Equal Justice Committee (EJC) to work together to achieve equitable treatment for all individuals in the court system. The Community Dialogue Plan's stated purpose is to:

Create a public forum for community members to describe their experiences and discuss ideas for advancing racial equality and fairness in the courts.

Third Judicial District Session Details

The session was held on the morning of October 2, 2010, from 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. at Rochester Math & Science Academy in Rochester, Minnesota. The small group facilitators included EJC members – Judge Jeff Thompson, Judge Nancy Bostrack, Nitaya Jandragholica, Kevin Riha, Paul Janzen, Suzanne Bublitz, Darlene Larson, and Angie Armon. Other representatives from the Third Judicial District who also facilitated small groups were: Judge Robert Birnbaum, Judge Joseph Chase, Judge Jodi Williamson, and Veronica Marchan. Basic information about the purpose of the Equal Justice Committee, a brief history of the Race Bias Task Force and Racial Fairness Committee, and an

explanation of the differences between the state courts and federal courts were given to participants in the way of background information.

SUMMARY OF THE THIRD JUDICIAL DISTRICT SESSION

Approximately 40 members of the Somali community attended this dialogue session. The larger group was split into four groups for the purpose of conducting small group dialogues. The make-up of the group was diverse, which allowed the EJC to get a good cross-section of experiences: two groups were Somali men, including community elders; one group was teenage Somali boys, and one group was Somali women and teenage girls.

Several issues were raised and discussed in the small group dialogues: immigration problems, lack of Somali representation on jury pools, truancy, parent's and children's rights, communication issues between parents and children and with the schools and police, lack of education about rules and laws, traditional marriage vs. legal marriage, interpreters, and public defenders.

Major Themes of the Session

Although the dialogues covered a wide variety of issues and concerns, two main themes were identified: the need for community/school liaison officers, and the need for education among the Somali community regarding the justice system.

COMMUNITY AND/OR SCHOOL LIAISON OFFICERS

Concerns were expressed about the language barriers that exist between Somali parents and their children, the result of the children having a better understanding and being more fluent in the English language than their parents. Parents indicated they often times feel left out or ignored when their children have interactions with law enforcement and because they do not always understand what is being said, they feel they are unable to adequately advocate for their children. A community liaison officer would be helpful in an effort to bridge this gap.

Similar issues were also expressed regarding the school system. It was suggested that in addition to a school liaison officer, it would be helpful for teachers and schools to be educated on the Somali culture to have a better understanding of Somali students and their backgrounds and perspectives.

Concerns were voiced within one small group that there is also inadequate orientation and introductory training for the largely refugee population regarding coming to America.

EDUCATION FOR THE SOMALI COMMUNITY REGARDING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

All small groups expressed a need for education within the Somali community about the laws and the justice system in general. Concerns were voiced that many in the Somali community lack the education and knowledge about what is legal and what is illegal and feel that with an education about the legal system, they could stop problems before they arise.

It was suggested that one venue in which to provide this training would be the cable TV channel where the Somali community currently airs programs nightly. It would be most beneficial to have a variety of members from the justice community provide this education – law enforcement, public defenders, prosecutors and judges.

SUMMATION

The Somali community members present at the dialogue session expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to discuss their experiences, concerns, and issues regarding the courts. Although some of their issues were broader and related to justice system partners and schools, the EJC members and judges present learned a lot from the dialogues and have a better understanding of the issues Somali community members face in the court system.

Proposed Suggestions for Improving the Court System

The following suggestions were noted during the dialogue sessions by members of the Somali community:

INTERPRETERS

- 1.) Ensure that interpreters are available at first appearances to assist defendants in understanding their rights.
- 2.) Find a way to improve the interpreting to include not just a translation of the words spoken, but also the meaning or context of the words.

DIVERSION PROGRAMS

Create diversion programs for minor offenders to be referred back to the Somali community for discipline.

JURY POOLS

Somali U.S. citizens should be encouraged to obtain a driver's license, register to vote and/or obtain some other government ID card so they are included in jury source lists.

PUBLIC DEFENDERS

Need for public defenders to take more time to ensure their Somali clients understand the consequences of accepting plea deals. Concerns expressed that public defenders seem young, inexperienced and overwhelmed, thus not of much assistance to the Somali community.

Suggestions for Future Community Dialogue Sessions

FACILITATORS

It was beneficial having judges act as facilitators for the small group dialogues for the following reasons: the members of the Somali community seemed to appreciate the fact that judges were present and actively involved in the dialogue; and the judges were able to address concerns regarding legal issues, law enforcement protocol, court proceedings, etc.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS/ASSEMBLING THE GROUP

Somali participants in the dialogue session did not assemble in the room in which the dialogue session was to take place, but rather assembled in other areas of the school facility. Once the meeting started, large numbers of people came into the meeting area at varying times, which required the presenter to start over with his introductory comments. This was not anticipated and had the committee been aware, the speaker could have waited to start the session until all participants were present in the meeting room.

REFRESHMENTS

Due to the fact the meeting was held in the morning, refreshments consisted of coffee, tea, and cookies. With some small funding, we could have been more gracious hosts. Although we did not hear complaints from participants, some on the planning committee felt it important to provide more traditional Somali fare, which would've been a much larger expense than what was provided.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR FACILITATORS

Some participants from the Somali community requested business cards from some facilitators, but the facilitators did not have business cards with them. Having facilitators bring business cards should be a consideration for future dialogue sessions.