

July 5, 2011

Dear Community Members:

Please find below the consultants' report and recommendations on the Northwest Baltimore City Community Conversations Project's Initial Community Assessment which, through a series of focus groups held in March 2011, explored relationships between African American and Jews who live together in the Northwest neighborhoods.

The report is divided into the following sections:

1. Background
2. General Observations
3. Communal Problem Areas
4. Opportunities
5. Recommendations
6. Next Steps

Thank you again to all who participated in this process. You have done a great service for our community. We look forward to your comments. Moreover, we are interested to learn what you would be interested to do further, and can you commit time and energy to participate in implementing the recommendations contained in this report. Please email your comments and expression of interest in participating to Alice Kolman (akolman@chaibaltimore.org).

Sincerely,

Sandy Johnson, President, Fallstaff Improvement Association
Ira Kolman, President, Mt. Washington Improvement Association
Derrick Lennon, President, Glen Neighborhood Improvement Association
Ron Rosenbluth, President, Cheswolde Neighborhood Association
Avraham Sauer, President, Cross Country Improvement Association

The Northwest Baltimore City Community Conversations Project

Initial Community Assessment

A look into the relationships between African American and Jewish groups in the community

Report on Focus Groups June 1, 2011

Background

In December 2010, as part of the area's strategic neighborhood-action planning process (SNAP), the presidents of five northwest neighborhood associations including Cheswolde, Cross Country, Fallstaff, Glen and Mt. Washington agreed to undertake an assessment of relations between African American and Jewish residents.

While these two groups have lived and worked together for years, for the betterment of the community, neighborhood association presidents and many others feel that their relationships, across all community levels, must continue to be strengthened to assure the long-term health and progress of both neighborhoods.

With the assistance of Comprehensive Housing Assistance Inc. (CHAI), the area's housing and community development organization, and a grant from a local foundation two consultants, Marvin Johnson J.D. and Jay Rothman Ph.D., both with extensive experience in community mediation, were engaged to undertake the assessment. Mr. Johnson is an African American and a Maryland resident with extensive experience, working with communities, business and labor. Mr. Rothman, who is Jewish, has extensive experience in conflict resolution for communities in the United States and abroad.

Between March 21, 2011 and March 23, 2011 approximately 125 people, representing a cross-section of each community's residents, participated in 13 focus groups, which were facilitated by the consultants. Each group's "conversations" lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with the focus groups comprised of high school students, neighborhood residents of all ages, clergy, businessmen and institutional/government representatives, all recruited by the neighborhood association presidents.

Each focus group was asked to share their assessment of current problems and opportunities in inter-communal relations, with the understanding that their identities would not be included in the report.

The following summarizes the consultants' observations regarding the problems and opportunities for this community. They are illuminated by direct quotes from participants (in italics). The report concludes with recommendations for next steps.

General Observations

Participants were open and honest; each expressed their passion and commitment to their community with intensity. Feelings were shared, and thoughts about why certain feelings exist were explained thoughtfully.

The diverse representation of people from various segments of the community was evident. That so many different people with busy schedules took the time to participate in this community-assessment process is a testament to how devoted they are to their community.

The desire to take ownership of issues and to find ways to move toward better understanding and increased daily civility was identified by participants throughout the focus group sessions. For example, *it was revealed in one focus group that the concerns bringing us together are evidence of our desire for harmony between our diverse communities and for a safe neighborhood.*

While it is clear that the community is generally a healthy one and relations are not prone to be antagonistic or hostile, community leaders are wise to be proactive. Thus, identifying concerns and issues, confronting problems openly and seizing opportunities for enhancing intra- and inter-communal issues is both constructive and promising.

There was a common agreement from both sides, expressed through their feelings and explained through focus-group discussions, that pluralism is alive and well. Cultural pride co-exists with a general acceptance for each other's diversity. There was a strong desire expressed to live in a community made strong by diversity and respect for differences, where civility is a highly regarded value, and safety is paramount.

In many ways what the community is doing in discussing and seeking to address issues head-on is proactively cutting edge and, if these efforts are successful in affecting change, they would be a model that could be applied in many other middle class, racially mixed neighborhoods around the country.

Communal Problem Areas

The following represent common problem areas in relations between African Americans and Jews in the community, reflected by the comments of the participants:

A. Misunderstanding

A primary cause of problems is a cultural misunderstanding between African Americans and Jews, mostly Orthodox Jews. In the focus groups, there were many stories shared from both sides about feeling misunderstood, or reflecting on why there are misunderstandings.

This misunderstanding leads to, or in some cases re-enforces, existing fears and prejudices.

There is fear on both sides, and it is what we need to work on.

It is the building of understanding that is the key.

This is exacerbated by built-in cultural and institutional separation due to religious and cultural differences.

The communities coexist without much positive interaction; we just don't have contact.

We don't know who they are and they don't know who we are. Something happens and people make stereotypes.

These are further reinforced by institutional separation, such as schools where Jewish and African American students do not learn together or interact.

There is a disconnect between the Baltimore City public schools and the Jewish schools. We need to have the principals of the various schools coming together.

I don't have any interaction with Black people.

The only exposure Jewish kids have to African Americans is when the kids are walking to and from school.

African Americans often feel excluded from institutional and economic power in general and sometimes, in ways that are real or perceived, by Jews in the neighborhood.

Many don't know they can use the JCC or what it offers.

The African American community is not aware of all the community services that are offered and open to everyone in the community. Many think it's just for the Jewish residents.

There must be a clear message that services are for the entire community.

B. Fear and Prejudice

Like misunderstanding, fear and prejudice were described in each community group.

Prejudice is not due to color or race; it is due to the way one is brought up.

To find common ground and come to a resolution we have to have both sides talking to each other.

This issue has some internal sources (family and communal ethnocentrism)

and some external sources (negative encounters, vandalism, apparent incivility, etc.). A number of people spoke about a lack of common courtesy and a wish for more civility in daily encounters (such as listening to elders, saying hello to one another, etc).

What kids say and do has a lot to do with what parents tell them.

There is a lot of tension about not respecting each other's holidays.

The prejudice between Orthodox Jews and the Black community is institutionalized.

C. Experiences and Perceptions of Crime and Safety

People expressed their feelings about how they were victims of crime or think about how they identify with a crime that is reported to them by neighbors. Often they don't have the opportunity for a healing process, and as a result this can, over time, create feelings of mistrust as well as festering wounds, which often harden into prejudice.

The main issue that creates tension is the crime issue.... and the experience of crime as an issue.

Parents become afraid to let children out to play on the street.

When I walk on Shabbos I'm scared, especially on side streets.

I have experienced a high level of fear on my street that I did not grow up with.

Sometimes a pernicious cycle unfolds in which each side feels like they are victims (directly or systematically) of the other

Northwest High School is always a source of friction in the neighborhood. Most, if not all, the students do not live in the community and that has always created some friction.

I don't think it has anything to do with color. We have juveniles running around in our neighborhood and I don't think it has to do with prejudice. It has to do with behavior.

A large part of the problem is because of poverty. It is because of those that have and those that don't have. We have to address this multi-faceted problem as a larger community.

OPPORTUNITIES

Acknowledgement of these issues is an important first step in this process. Viewing the problems as opportunities for the community is described next. Participants shared their feelings and thoughts regarding a host of ways to address what they identified as communal issues.

A. Promoting Mutual Understanding

As repeated throughout many of the focus groups, community members had given this issue considerable thought, and offered concrete ideas about how tensions between the groups affected everyone in the neighborhood.

Suggestions were made that Orthodox Jews might provide educational opportunities for African Americans (in schools, in special programs) to learn about unique cultural behaviors of their Jewish neighbors that are sometimes misunderstood (for example, that it is customary for Orthodox Jewish men and women not to interact with people from the

opposite gender; and about holidays and dietary laws). In turn, educating Jews about the unique history and culture of African Americans and their family structures would also be welcomed and their perspective would be most useful.

If I had my way, someone from the Orthodox community would speak to the African American community, and someone from the African American community would speak to the Orthodox community.

Need to have mutual understanding. The more you know about each other's communities it is easier to accept and understand others.

We need to meet. Particularly on the subject of violence

B. Promoting Cooperative Problem Solving and Strategic Planning

If the community, African American and Jewish together, can organize itself in a more inclusive and strategically effective way to promote a safe and healthy environment, then current problems will indeed become opportunities for constructing a virtuous cycle of cooperative problem solving and mutual aid. There was an eagerness expressed by many individuals to create opportunities for African American and Jewish leaders to organize, identify, and address issues together based on agreed-upon goals.

The local rabbis and pastors have to have a dialogue which would impact the entire community. If the religious leaders are on board, so would most of the community.

Healing always has to be at the top. African American and Jewish people always turn to higher sources - the rabbis and pastors.

There is a commitment to bring the African American and the Jewish community together in non-confrontational settings.

C. Promoting Tolerance/Acceptance

Any community is only as strong as its ability to accept its members, including those who are different from one another. Members of this distinctive community are African American and Jewish, religious and secular. While certain insularity is natural within sub-groups of a community, it need not lead to negative or intolerant attitudes or actions. In fact, such intolerance must be proactively countered and overcome for the community to be whole, healthy and peaceful. Both groups shared strong desires to be heard, acknowledged, accepted and understood.

Main issue is lack of knowledge about other people's cultures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to remedy the problems and take advantage of the opportunities that currently exist, several actions are recommended.

These recommendations include a focus on leadership training and engaging religious leaders, as well as youth, to be community leaders in the next steps of this process. It was also suggested that attention be given to institutional-capacity building. Moreover, engaging in a systematic process for collaborative visioning was strongly advocated by many. Ideas include:

1. Hold a series of carefully designed and facilitated dialogue, goal-setting and action-planning meetings between various stakeholders in the community.
2. African American and Jewish religious leaders should develop internal and interactive goals and strategies to support and foster responses to community problems and opportunities.
3. Create a youth-led leadership development program for improving community relations.
4. Make more opportunities for both communities' youth to encounter each other in carefully structured programs (i.e. dialogue groups, educational programs).
5. Create a training program for the board members of neighborhood associations and other community organizations to enhance organizational management skills and to assure long-term organizational accountability to the community.

The following community-based grassroots recommendations are driven by the need to increase communications across the entire community; to develop and conduct educational and awareness programs; and to provide trauma counseling.

1. Develop an internet-based system to provide information to the community at large about issues concerning neighborhood associations, including community activities, as well as community security and safety issues.
2. A Citizens Council should be established to develop a campaign of civility and mutual respect.
3. Co-develop educational seminars available to schools, religious institutions and neighborhood institutions.
4. An "undoing racism" program that includes sharing the history and the culture of both communities.
5. Trauma counseling should be made readily available in schools, religious and other community institutions for those who have been victims of crime or prejudice.
6. A planning meeting with the Northwest High School leadership to explore concerns and opportunities, and to see how this initiative can contribute to an improved school system within the larger community.

NEXT STEPS

In the coming weeks, leaders from neighborhood associations, clergy and others will reflect on these recommendations and begin to propose specific and concrete next steps.

Based on current thinking, a small leadership group of African Americans and Jews will be convened to initially address this report and determine goals for moving forward. This would be accomplished through a series of two half-day workshop sessions in late July. Part of this group's responsibility will be to lay the ground work for a larger gathering of community members to be held in the fall.

There will be a role for you. Stay tuned!