**Equity in Action: Spotlighting the Mecklenburg Model for Community Justice**

Transcript

The Criminal Justice Community Engagement Task Group comprises of a group of 12 community members that reside in Mecklenburg County. It was started through our Criminal Justice Advisory Group who wanted to have liaisons that can connect community and the criminal justice system. The Criminal Justice Advisory Group really was looking for community members to be at the table to help make policy and practice changes.

And with the help of MacArthur's Safety and Justice Challenge, we were able to provide funding, not only to have equity inclusion consultants to lead the work, but also to fund our Community Engagement Task Group members in order to make sure that the work was accomplished.

What we're looking for really are Task Group members that can provide a variety of experiences from lived experience through the justice space, as well as different professions. We have everything from mental health to educators, we have formal law enforcement. We also wanna make sure that there's diversity in race and sexuality, so that is also present. And also we have a variation of age.

We involve people with lived experience as a huge part of our Task Group requirement. We do have several people who have lived experiences on our Task Group. We also make sure that we highlight mental health through having members who have professions within the mental health space, and really just able to have the parallel with criminal justice services, who has an array of wraparound services for the criminal justice system, everything from pretrial, forensics, to our reentry services.

Some of our highlights are a strategic plan that we recently completed in 2023. And within that plan, we really want to just focus on our three Es, and what we consider three Es are education, empowerment, and engagement. And so within that, we were able to launch our "Community Conversations," which is a space that brings neighborhoods together, as well as invites our system leaders in the criminal justice space to be able to sit down and have conversation about the important topics that are happening within the criminal justice space in our community.

With the "Youth Resource Fair," we were able to bring together over 30 organizations, county and grassroot, that specialize in services for our youth. We had over 60 youth and their families that attended the event, and they were able to connect directly with these resources. We also wanted to have a youth panel so that there can be a discussion for our caregivers, for our youth that were in the audience, for the organizations that were present, to really ask them questions about how can we best support youth.

The Safety and Justice Challenge connects to the work through the funding that was provided to CSG Justice Center for a cohort that I actually am a part of along with other SJC sites across the country. And so in that cohort, it really is honed in on racial equity, but not just racial equity, economic equity, equity in terms of gender. And so with that cohort, we are kind of coming together to share resources, our experiences, successes, and barriers to really just figure out ways to better enhance the work that we're doing individually in our different sites, but also as a collective, to just kind of build upon each other and support each other.

And we are also excited because we're gonna be host kind of launching our webinars. It will be members from our cohort that will be panelists to really just highlight the way that we are advancing racial equity and other equity efforts and inclusion within our counties through the "Safety and Justice Challenge."

The last year, as a part of our strategic plan for 2023, we actually have been working to build our Criminal Justice Youth Leadership Board Framework. The goal of the Criminal Justice Youth Leadership Board is really for us to be able to highlight youth experiences in the criminal justice space, whether it be youth who are at risk in the criminal justice space, directly impacted, or indirectly impacted. So it could be someone who actually has been touched by the justice system, or someone who had a parent who was incarcerated, which we know still impacts the family.

We wanna really hear their voices, their expertise, as well as really just kind of build their leadership skills, so that being through learning about data, learning the history of systematic racism in Mecklenburg County, really just kind of identifying ways that we can empower their voices, they will actually sit directly under the Criminal Justice Advisory Group, which houses all of our criminal justice system leaders, similarly to the Community Engagement Task Group.

So they have a direct line of communication with our system leaders and being able to provide guidance, their expertise around policy and practice changes for our Mecklenburg County criminal justice system.

The Task Group's 2024-2025 strategic plan will continue to concentrate on three key areas as we did during last year's plan. We will continue to foster constructive dialogue between community and the criminal justice system through our Mecklenburg Community Action forms.

We also are planning another youth resource fair in the spring of 2025, and the Task Group will be providing guidance and support to our newly-launched Criminal Justice Youth Leadership Board.

What has personally inspired me to get involved? First, I am a Black woman in America. I come from a lineage of people who have been harmed in this country, and really just gravitate to issues of people of color. I feel like this is life work for me. Equity and inclusion for all is a big part of what kind of keeps my fire going.

There's too many injustices that have been happening for decades, for a very long time, and I feel like it's my mission to really keep this work going. People will say it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. I would also add to that, that it's a relay, so it takes everyone, it takes everyone to be involved.

My goal in this work is for us to really just level the playing field. Regardless of what position you have, regardless of your race, regardless of your income, at the end of the day, we all should be supporting and caring for one another. There is so much to be excited about here in Mecklenburg County. A lot of people willing to partner, break the silos, collaborate, all in the spirit of making Mecklenburg County community much better place.

Our Task Group is a part of that. You have 12 individuals who are caring, they're passionate, they're action-oriented, and they're ready to go. And so I'm very proud and honored to be a part of this space and to help facilitate these beautiful beings who are really just trying to create positive change and make a difference here.

So I'm excited about it all. I know that they're gonna execute this strategic plan just like they did the last one. And I look forward to see the impact that they continue to make on Mecklenburg County community.