

TO: AB1185 Community Outreach Working Group Members

FROM: Cameron McElhiney, Director of Training and Education  
National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement

RE: Findings Summary for Focus Groups Conducted on Behalf of the AB1185 Community Outreach Working Group

## Background

In June 2022 the Marin County Civil Grand Jury released a report, *Sheriff Oversight: The Time is Now* stating that “to significantly improve accountability of the Sheriff’s Office, the Marin County Board of Supervisors (BOS), pursuant to AB 1185, should create a citizens oversight board which would establish county oversight of the Sheriff’s Office; provide a forum for voicing all county residents’ concerns about the Sheriff’s Office; and build trust between the Sheriff’s Office and the communities it serves.” The report preceded the adoption of [California Government Code § 25303.7](#), commonly referred to as [Assembly Bill 1185](#) (AB 1185, 2020).

As a result, the County of Marin and the Board of Supervisors made a commitment to establish an independent community oversight structure for the Marin County Sheriff’s Office (MCSO), with the goal of cultivating trust, transparency and accountability. To carry this out, a community engagement process was initiated to gather meaningful community input on the framework, structure, and authority for such an oversight mechanism. As a result, in September 2022, 15 individuals were invited to join the Community Outreach Working Group (COWG). The commitment of these individuals was to promote community engagement among constituents, conduct outreach to all interested parties, and research effective practices of civilian oversight of law enforcement.

As part of its efforts, the COWG worked with the County and the National Association of Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement (NACOLE) to develop nine (9) focus groups. The resulting sessions were seen as a way to ensure those communities most affected by policing practices were heard from and were able to provide input into the overall process carried out by the COWG.

## Methods

The methods and questions for the focus groups were developed by NACOLE in collaboration with the Focus Group Subcommittee of the COWG. Five focus groups were conducted in person at locations within Marin County with the assistance of various community partners including Marin County Probation Services, Canal Alliance, and the Marin City Teen Center. Four focus groups were conducted virtually to provide opportunities for those not able to make an in-person event. Community partners allowed for a diverse group of participants and included Dominican University, College of Marin, College of Marin UMOJA, Multicultural Center of Marin, and Youth Transforming Justice.

Focus groups explored questions related to perceptions of and trust in the MCSO. Areas explored included their knowledge of existing complaint processes, the composition and duties of a civilian

oversight committee, and their thoughts about the inclusion of an inspector general in the oversight mechanism.

## Limitations

The focus groups had several limitations. First, in the course of the focus group discussions it became apparent that participants had little to no existing knowledge of civilian oversight of law enforcement. This often created the necessity for facilitators to explain terminology and concepts. In addition, not everyone in the groups had previous interactions with MCSO. Lastly, particularly in the virtual sessions, it appeared that many were participating solely to receive the gift card provided. During virtual sessions approximately 50% of the attendees spoke or turned on their cameras.

Despite these limitations, we did receive feedback from members of the community who we would have not otherwise heard from. It can also be assumed that this exercise will provide a valuable roadmap for future community outreach efforts conducted by the oversight mechanism eventually put in place.

## Focus Group Responses

The following represent some of the responses received throughout the time that the focus groups spent together. As mentioned previously, each group explored the same set of questions and a sampling of their responses follow.

### Experience and Perceptions of the Marin County Sheriff's Office

While there were some participants who chose not to share their perceptions or experiences with the Sheriff's Office, the overwhelming majority of participants let us know of both their positive and negative interactions with and perceptions of the Marin County Sheriff's Office.

- Have had more experience with police than Sheriff.
- I haven't had any interactions with the Sheriff's Office.
- The office is not easily accessible.
- I am fearful what would happen if I was stopped so I drive slow in the county.
- It has been a good experience, no problems so far.
- Felt they were professional and look forward to working with them.
- Experience was that there are cultural misunderstandings between the sheriff's deputies and the community.
- Their coordination with ICE is unacceptable.
- Black and brown people are stopped more.
- Although I do not have any problems with the Sheriff's Office, I think others in the community do.
- They treat the blacks differently and it's an issue that should be addressed if possible.
- Have been able to speak with the Sheriff and Undersheriff – willing to speak with people.
- I haven't had any direct interaction but my perception from hearing from others is that the department has been biased in the past. When I look at the demographics of the county and the demographics of who is contacted by the department, it is not equal.
- No contacts were positive, and most were intimidating at best, terrifying at worst and incredibly frustrating for the lack of communication and language accommodation.

- Participants have witnessed them punching, Tasing and hurting people during arrests.
- There is a lack of language accommodation and/or bilingual deputies or staff in the Sheriff's Department and no documents or forms translated or accessible for services which is against state law.
- My son (of color) had a knife pulled on him by a white person, and I felt it was handled very well and they wanted to get the suspect into the restorative justice program and I thought that was very good.
- A lot of residents feel their cities have been over-policed. They feel like it is being used as a training ground.
- When MCSO is at events to build community, they stand around in full uniform in groups and it looks more like they are there to keep order than to build community.
- There is no continuity of care between the MCSO and additional services.
- Deputies initiate contacts for small violations, primarily traffic stops, and are never present for major violent incidents and claim to be understaffed when needed.
- The Sheriff's office lacks racial diversity.
- There are deployment problems: Specifically, there are too many deputies in the community at night and not enough during the day, which is logistically problematic and doesn't allow for development of relationships with youth who are out and about during the day.
- Deputies do not seem to be trained in policing trauma-impacted communities.
- Deputies are cycled out of neighborhoods so frequently that they are unable to create relationships.
- One Black attendee from a primarily white neighborhood related that he was profiled and unnecessarily contacted at his own home.
- Background investigations and vetting should be enhanced to reveal any history of racism, including deeper psychological examinations.
- Deputies should be educated about Black culture and should be required to perform some community service before being assigned to Black communities.
- Improve and lengthen training requirements for deputies.
- The things he said was personal and disrespectful ("You Mexicans are making our streets dirty").
- They give passes to white kids for doing the same shit we do.

#### Information Regarding the Current Complaint Process

Overwhelming, participants were not aware that there was a complaint process. Some indicated that they might have wanted to file a complaint within the last several years if they had known there was a process and if they felt comfortable at the time. Regardless of their knowledge of the current process or if they had previously filed a complaint, the following information was shared by participants:

- I am a social worker, so I encounter people who have feelings or experiences and support them along the way if needed. It's important to let them know that there is a process and to be supportive.
- I have gone to meetings with the sheriff and the BOS in regard to the Truth Act which calls for an annual meeting, and that's how I know of the process.

- There is no punishment, and the deputies just get worse as a result.
- Historically, nothing is done, so it seems that nobody cares, and we must fix things ourselves.
- Complaint filings are discounted and are not forwarded for appropriate handling.
- Requests for body-worn camera video are disregarded and dismissed.
- They never received any follow up at all on a complaint and they received no correspondence.
- One complainant filed a complaint while in jail. It was not escalated and a response was never received.
- My mom made a complaint. No one ever called her to follow up or even say they got the complaint, so it felt useless. I would still make a complaint in the future so it would be on their record.
- I did not know there was a process. I have not had a reason to complain, but even if I did it would have to be something very serious. [After this comment was made, the group seemed to be in agreement that they said they would not want to “waste anyone’s time” by making a complaint for something “small” because officials are busy and they didn’t want to be a “bother.”]

#### Most Important Powers/Duties of an Established Community Oversight Structure Would Include:

- Ability to file complaints by phone or video call.
- Education on oversight and Sheriff practices.
- Community outreach by the civilians.
- Better community relations and transparency.
- Hold the sheriff’s office accountable when complaints are made and found to have merit.
- Reduce the disproportionate incarceration rate of communities of color.
- Subpoena power and independent community contact.
- If someone is harmed by the department, there should be follow up with resources like financial counseling, mental health support, and relocation help.
- The oversight agency must be separate from all groups in order to garner trust by being unbiased.
- Those incarcerated should have a safe and anonymous way to make complaints in a way that can minimize the threat of retaliation.
- Independence to create reviews, investigate excessive force cases and public complaints of police misconduct.
- An independent review process and subpoena power through the Inspector General.
- There needs to be meetings with the public.
- There needs to be clarity of what the objectives are and the metrics for measuring those objectives.
- People who know and understand the issues unique to the Latino community should be part of the process and part of the new office. There is a big need for them to regularly reach out to our community and our community to be part of the new structure.
- Sheriff’s office should investigate themselves.
- Sheriff’s office should not be in charge of their own investigations.
- Subpoena power and sufficient independence to conduct quality investigations.
- They should have policy input.

- Should have a role in dictating training and monitoring adherence to those training requirements.
- Oversight of officer hiring, vetting, and training.
- Oversight of wellness programs for deputies.
- Should have ability to examine systemic issues and conduct audits.
- Should have direct access to deputies' information to conduct effective investigations and audits.

#### Ultimate Goals You Would Like Civilian Oversight to Have in Your Community

- Fairness, accountability, and transparency
- A system that is not corrupt
- More trust in the sheriff and trust in the process whether you are black, white, or brown
- Improved accessibility
- Awareness programs
- Meeting once a month, perhaps twice a month with compensation for their time
- Meetings that are open to the entire public
- A positive shift in regard to the sheriff
- Folks from communities where the sheriff interacts with people must reporting – in both qualitative and quantitative – an improved sense of feeling protected by the MCSO

#### Who Do You Think Should Serve on an Oversight Commission?

- People of different races
- Language can be a barrier
- A non-American
- People who want to improve the community
- Experienced people
- People with intellectual disabilities
- People who are willing to serve and improve the community
- I would love to see people who are candid and hospitable
- Must include people that look like us (Black people)
- Should be diverse and representative of the entire county.
- They must be experienced and understand the mode of operation in the sheriff office
- Not current or former law enforcement
- Community representing community
- A diverse board that doesn't have any political allegiances to the BOS.
- Human Rights Commission could appoint
- Former law enforcement should be included
- People who run programs that address injustices in the community
- A high school student

### Additional Feedback

- The lack of anonymity [in a virtual meeting] is frightful. I can't imagine with someone from a vulnerable community who has had run-ins with the sheriff's office feels right now.
- No response to my submitted request.
- I think this process is ok, having an outside facilitator/NACOLE person instead of a Marin County employee made me more confident to participate.
- When do you anticipate a committee being in place?
- Are the names of the committee members who are designing the process available?
- The publicity of the survey, the focus groups, etc. was abysmal.
- Can the Sheriff's department contribute to the financing of the board?
- In order to diversify boards, you need to offer compensation otherwise you get a group of retired people who have time on their hands.
- I hope it is not called a committee because that sounds like a committee of the Board of Supervisors (as opposed to its own organization)
- Communications and language issues prohibit many people in our community from navigating public safety systems and services. The deputies could not treat us the way they do if we understood our rights and the way the courts and justice system work. There is also a strong perception that deputies from the Sheriff's department are capable of hurting or killing people and they are not to be called or asked for help at any time.
- It feels safer filing a complaint with civilian oversight rather than Sheriff's office.
- There is a need to keep the community informed this process is happening (community outreach).
- Little confidence in the efficacy of an oversight board.
- Deputies must be part of the conversation about making change and deputies should also be made to feel safe.
- Deputies need to care about the communities they serve, take responsibility, and see community as brothers and sisters.
- "We are disconnected from each other, which is a pervasive sickness."
- "We've been attending meetings like this for years and nothing changes."