CAMBRIDGE MATTERS – 2022-03

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As I was having my breakfast on Sunday morning, one of the headlines of the Washington Post caught my eye. It read “Cities look to halt deadly surge.” The article went on to talk about what cities around the country were experiencing with regard to increased killings and what some of them were doing to respond.

With police departments being strained for multiple reasons and Covid-19 continuing to have its impact on the mental health of communities, interesting and innovative as well as old fashion ideas are being tried, and some are being successful.

I, of course, thought about our situation in Cambridge and other nearby cities. I understand that our police force is down to forty-six officers with two more planning to retire in the next few months and four new officers currently being trained. When accomplished, that will still put us below the level of police protection that we have had in past years. Causes include government competition for officers through salary increases and burn out of those that continu to serve the public during these challenging times.

The Post article also brought to mind that Moving Dorchester Forward that I mentioned in an earlier Cambridge Matters is planning a virtual community forum on February 1, 2022, from 7-9 p.m. to do a couple of things. First, we plan to hear from the community with speakers on a variety of important topics. As part of those conversations, we hope to have representatives of government, nonprofit, mental health, and community organizations share what they are doing to provide services in our community. We also plan to collect comments, questions, and ideas from those of you who attend and provide your thoughts in the Chat function that will be available.

Another part of this effort will be additional sessions in the following months that will look at ways that we as a community can begin to make a difference. This will not be a quick and easy fix, as the problems and challenges here are deep and long standing, but we need to start sometime. We think that time is now.

As part of the discussion about what the police around the country are trying to do, I saw that one of the major problems is the unwillingness of the community to come forward to report crimes such as what they saw when a killing occurred. Columbus, Ohio is planning a “citizen radio patrol” where residents can patrol their own neighborhoods and call-in information about crimes and concerning behavior to help the police.

People in many communities won’t report crimes because they do not trust the police that their reporting will remain confidential. They are also concerned about retaliation for making a report. That reminded me of a murder case that I was appointed to as a young lawyer.

My client, who was an inmate at the Lorton Penitentiary in Virginia, was charged with killing another inmate in the lunchroom of the facility in front of ninety other inmates. As it was a federal facility, the trial was in Federal Court in Alexandria. The judge ordered the facility to facilitate my meeting every one of those inmates in the lunchroom the day of the killing to talk about what they saw so that I could have the opportunity to provide a defense to my client.

He was charged with a Capital Offense that subjected him to the death penalty. After talking with those inmates who would talk to me, I learned that not one of them saw what happened, and some did not even remember being present when the killing occurred. In a similar way, the residents of our neighborhoods where murders occur will not risk their lives to report what they saw. The only reason that some might do it would be if they were confident that they and their family would be protected and their information kept confidential. Looking at how that might be done here should be a priority.

I also saw people being reluctant to report and testify when I heard domestic violence cases as a judge. Too many victims would not testify against their abuser yet remained with them to be beaten again. Those victims need to have resources to allow them to escape their abuser, and most, if not all of them, do not have those resources available to them.

As these problems and challenges are multi-faceted, the solutions must also be multi-faceted. Our city and county governments need to provide more resources to the police and in the community through some of the many ideas that were shared in the Post article that we know can work here. They are not just resources for the victims of crime. They are reading programs, after-school programs, and summer programs for the children in our community in order that they can be successful in their education. They are programs for children that are truant from school, in foster care, or have become involved in delinquent behavior.

I urge you and your neighbors to listen in to the Community Conversation on February 1st and the follow-up sessions that will focus in more detail on how we as a community can advocate for solutions through government action and resources that we know are available as a result of the America Cares Act.

A major player in finding the solutions that are needed is our local faith community. Our churches need to come together and develop plans and resources to help make a difference. Without them working together, solutions are just that much harder to find.

Attached is a flyer about the Community Conversation event on February 1st, 2022, from 7-9 p.m. Included are the links to join the event, to register, if you want, and to provide your thoughts and ideas before the virtual event. Please join us and be part of the solution.

Thanks for reading.

Steve Rideout