

Ulster County commission, public discuss criminal justice system reforms

By Patricia R. Doxsey
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KINGSTON, N.Y. — About 75 Ulster County residents tuned into a Zoom meeting about a plan for revamping the county's criminal justice system that aims to end mass incarceration in the county, improve police oversight and accountability, address systemic racial bias and heal relationships between the county Sheriff's Office and residents.

The plan, created by the Ulster County Justice & Reform Commission, sets out goals in each of the four categories, as well as a series of immediate and long-term steps to be taken to achieve the goals.

Much of the two-hour discussion Thursday evening focused on recommendations that would affect the Sheriff's Office, including proposals to create independent community advisory boards throughout the county to address concerns with the office, have deputies work as school resource officers, downsize the jail, expand the county's restorative justice programs and reduce recidivism.

Edgar Rodriguez said the creation of a civilian review board that gives citizens a voice is integral to fostering trust in the Sheriff's Office.

"The most important thing that you can do, which you don't, is support accountability," Rodriguez said to Sheriff Juan Figueroa, who was part of the Zoom meeting.

"The community needs to be empowered to have meaningful oversight as long as you maintain the same power structure," said Tanya Marquette.

Figueroa said he was amenable to having an advisory board but not a review board, saying he answers to the voters who put him in office.

"I have oversight, I am the civilian representative of the Ulster County Sheriff's Office," Figueroa said. He said relinquishing the authority over the office that voters gave to him would be "wrong" and that you can't "force-feed structural change" on people.

"I am going to push for structural change," he said, noting he has changed some 20 policies since assuming office in 2019.

"You elected me to do the job," he said. "Let me do the job."

Figueroa also found himself defending the use of deputies as school resource officers in two school districts to residents who said having law enforcement in schools exacerbates the "school-to-prison pipeline" by turning issues better dealt with mental health or school officials into law-enforcement matters.

To help reduce recidivism, Jacki Browstein suggested commission members expand their call for more affordable housing to include low-income and supportive housing for inmates who are being released from incarceration. Maggie Veve said the county should look more closely at the impact "technical violations" of probation have on incarceration rates in the county.

Speakers supported proposals that would expand the county's mobile mental health team, including the placement of a mental health professional at the county's 911 dispatch center, and improve the way law enforcement handles calls involving drug overdoses.

Deputy County Executive Anna Markowitz said the commission will use the comments gathered during the meeting to create a final plan that will go to the Ulster County Legislature for adoption in February.

An adopted plan must be submitted to the state by April 1.