

# Chester County District Attorney's Office

DEBORAH RYAN  
DISTRICT ATTORNEY



201 W. Market St., Suite 4450  
Post Office Box 2746  
West Chester, PA 19380-0991  
Phone: 610-344-6801  
Fax: 610-344-5905

## NEWS RELEASE

For more information contact Michelle Bjork, Director of Communications, at [mbjork@chesco.org](mailto:mbjork@chesco.org) or 610-344-6820.

---

January 31, 2022

### DAO REPORTS FINDINGS OF RACE & JUSTICE TASK FORCE PROGRAMS HELD COUNTY-WIDE

Over the past 18 months, the Chester County Law Enforcement Task Force on Race & Justice, formed by the District Attorney's Office, delivered programs to hundreds of people across the county in its efforts to improve relationships between law enforcement and communities of color. Programming included facilitated workshops about interactions between law enforcement and residents as well as town hall screenings of a documentary about overcoming systemic racism.

The events hosted by the Task Force were rich with stories of personal experiences, honest exchanges about law enforcement and residents' perspectives, and invaluable learning – all of which informed the Task Force on the next steps in 2022. While the issues between police and communities of color have deep roots and are not easily solved, these events provided a space for tough conversations and new connections.

There were two main takeaways from the workshops and town halls:

- To have a more trusting relationship between residents and law enforcement, our **perceptions** of each other need to change.
- Residents want a better **understanding** of law enforcement's job.

DA Deb Ryan said, "Building trust between law enforcement and communities of color and changing inaccurate perceptions are fundamental elements of bridging respectful relationships. Listening to each other is critical to understanding our different perspectives and embracing our similarities. We thank everyone who participated for their honesty and openness in addressing these difficult issues. We are extremely grateful to the United Way of Chester County for supporting this important initiative and know that our work is not done. We will continue to collaborate for a better future for all our Chester County communities."

Christopher Saello, President & CEO of United Way of Chester County, said, “We very much appreciate the efforts of District Attorney Ryan to convene law enforcement representatives and residents from every corner of the county to speak and be heard. Respect is gained when people talk and listen to each other, and mutual understanding can be found. We especially appreciate all the participants, both residents and law enforcement, for being open and transparent. These are difficult conversations to have, and participating in these hard discussions is the only way to find common ground.

“We look forward to continuing to support the work of the District Attorney to build bridges in Chester county.”

Steven Plaugher, President of Chester County FOP Lodge #11 and a Task Force member, said, “We were excited to participate with the Task Force on Race & Justice and discuss this complex topic with our community stakeholders. Residents and police seemed to come out of these meetings with a better understanding of each other.

“Although there is still much work ahead for the task force, I would like the community to know that our police go out each day dedicated to treating our citizens with dignity and respect regardless of race.”

The 13 Race & Justice workshops were held in churches, schools, and community centers in each of the county’s school districts. DeVon Jackson, an expert in diversity, equity, and inclusion, led the workshops that involved six residents of color and six law enforcement talking about their experiences and relationships with each other.

Jackson said, “Understanding the effects of systemic issues – including areas around race – within local communities is key to building community. I am grateful the DA’s office recognizes that and has put forth programming to tackle those issues.”

Fear and perception were two of the most common themes of residents’ comments, which often involved concerns for their children. Some residents commented that there is a lack of cultural sensitivity, little minority representation on the police force, and a violent portrayal of blacks by the media.

Law enforcement expressed that the perception that the police target minorities is inaccurate and reinforced the sentiment that law enforcement does not support acts of racism or violence in any way.

Task Force member and criminal defense attorney Steve Jarmon said, “I was really impressed by the dedication of the police officers on the task force and their ability to understand the feelings and emotions of the communities that they police.”

In addition to the workshops, the Task Force held public town hall viewings – virtually and in-person – of the award-winning documentary film, *Walking While Black: L.O.V.E. Is The Answer*, written and produced by A.J. Ali. Following the movie, The Peace Center of Bucks County, an organization that fosters building peace within communities, held small-group discussions where residents recounted personal experiences, and law enforcement answered questions about hiring procedures and the reasoning behind some of their practices.

Some of the goals for 2022 include hosting speakers and panel discussions about the role of law enforcement, traffic stops, and the use of force. Additionally, the Task Force will focus on youth engagement.

Ryan stated, “Over the past two years, we have trained all DAO employees on the issues of implicit bias, cultural sensitivity, use of force, and de-escalation techniques. Today, the diversity of our staff is more reflective of our community than at any other point in the history of this office. We will continue in our mission to pursue justice equitably and fairly.”

Watch for announcements in the coming weeks about how the Task Force will continue the conversations, solicit input from the youth, and communicate better with the community.

Building trust and understanding between the residents and law enforcement takes work – work that the Task Force is committed to doing.

.....  
Approved for release by Deborah Ryan, District Attorney