

Executive Order 203 Compliance Group

December 2, 2020 Meeting Notes

Members Present: Malta Town Supervisor Darren O'Connor; City of Mechanicville Supervisor Tom Richardson; Dr. Michael Prezioso, Commissioner of Mental Health & Addiction Services; District Attorney Karen Heggen; Public Defender Andrew Blumenberg; Opal Hinds, Esq.; Assistant County Attorney Michael Hartnett – Advisor to the Group; Pastor Aaron Koonsman, Community Alliance Church; Isaac Denton, Grace Fellowship Church; Reverend Heather Williams and Allison, Upper New York Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Prezioso welcomed those in attendance. He asked the members of the Group to introduce themselves.

Dr. Prezioso said he wanted to take a moment to remind everyone of the process. The process has been designed in furtherance of Executive Order 203 the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative. The Order directs a comprehensive review of current police force deployments, strategies, policy & procedures, and practices for addressing the particular needs of the community served and to promote community engagement to foster trust, fairness and legitimacy. Stakeholders including but not limited to membership and leadership of the local police force, members of the community, interested non-profit and faith based community groups, the local office of the District Attorney, the local Public Defender, and the local elected officials shall be consulted. Members have identified stakeholder groups, have been or are in the process of being identified and will have the opportunity to speak to the Executive Order 203 Compliance Group for 3 minutes each. Members of the public are invited to call in to listen to stakeholder input and Compliance Group discussion. Stakeholders in the public are strongly encouraged to submit comments in written form. On the Saratoga County website there is a link to the Executive Order 203 Compliance Group page that has a survey that can be responded as well as information about emailing comments.

Dr. Prezioso said at this time he would ask the callers to speak in the order they called in.

Pastor Aaron Koonsman, Community Alliance Church said at this point he is listening, basically. He just wanted to hear what this was about. He doesn't have any comment at this point in time.

Pastor Isaac Denton, Grace Fellowship Church said he would agree with Pastor Koonsman. He was jumping in on the call to observe and hear what we are at on everything and go from there.

Mr. O'Connor thanked the Pastors for joining the group and said it was appreciated. He said what we are interested in is making sure that everyone has the opportunity to address this Group; and therefore the Board of Supervisors in figuring out what kind of ways we can improve policing in Saratoga County to make sure what has happened in some parts of the Country doesn't happen here in Saratoga County. The core of the issue, he thinks, is discrimination, racial discrimination in policing. We have a tremendous Sheriff's Department. But, we are going to comply with the Executive Order to make sure we can either keep our Sheriff's Department the way it is without racial discrimination or change things if they need changing. We are doing a comprehensive review of that. We want to make sure that everyone has the maximum opportunity for input. What we are asking the faith based community, if they could do, see if people in your congregations have had any problems or experiences negatively with the Sheriff's Department in Saratoga County; those people especially let us know what the recommendations might be and other people with any kind of advice whatsoever. We want to make sure we get all of the advice from all of the stakeholders. If the word could be spread among their congregations, he thinks that would help this group out a lot. Mr. O'Connor thanked them.

Ms. Heggen said as a follow up to what Supervisor O'Connor just stated. Perhaps it might be helpful if the Pastors have had people come to them who have had experiences with the criminal justice system. And they have turned to them. Have there been areas where they have found had a stream of information or a path to follow or where you have had difficulty in assisting people who are challenged. Whether they were involved as family members of people who were charged with crimes or people who were victims of crimes that may also provide the Group with some insight as to areas of concerns. Either good or bad as this is not just about identifying negative aspects. We would also like to emphasize and build on the positive things that go on when it comes to policing in Saratoga County. This

Group's emphasis is on the Sheriff's Department but she doesn't think the Group's interest is limited only to those kinds of experiences.

Pastor Koonsman said he has not personally heard anything from his congregation that has been anything negative or an issue of that sort as is being spoke about. He said he could definitely reach out and ask if there is any more input. He will say that his primary experience dealing with law enforcement that was when he was serving as an assistant Chaplain in Comstock for a little over a year. That is obviously on a State level not on the County level. He has not actually been within the Saratoga County jail. He has only had experience with the Warren County Jail. Warren County seems to be fine in his experience as far as getting in and out. His request without knowing anything specifically about the Saratoga County Jail would be there would be a process in place or continue to be a process in place for those individuals from the faith based community that want access to be able to provide for the inmates that are in there for whatever period of time that they can get in there as simply as possible. He understands the security concerns. The County has to deal with whoever is admitted. He knows that on the State level it is very complicated to get in on a regular basis. He's not sure how that is on the County level. The easier that process could be would be preferred so that they can help serve individuals that are in that environment.

Dr. Prezioso said there have been a couple of people who have joined. He invited them to introduce themselves and make comments.

Reverend Heather Williams and Allison, Saratoga Springs United Methodist Church. Reverend Williams said usually this is not her forum to speak. Usually she is doing a sermon. She said she came for information sake, to gain more wisdom about the decision making process and the committee as a whole. She said she knows some of the members that are on the committee and wants to be better informed to help their congregation support our values in our community. In Saratoga Springs United Methodist Church we value radical inclusivity, justice focused outreach while we nurture God centered family. The justice focused outreach branch of our congregation wants to be more active and involved in the affairs that are happening in the community. The only way they could do that was to be present. To hear the information and know what is being discussed and how the decisions are being made and who sits at the table. And whose voices are being heard. And whose voices are not being heard. That is why they came today.

Dr. Prezioso thanked them for coming. He said the Group is the result of the Governor's Executive Order 203 and is designed to gather information from different stakeholder groups in the community and then share that information ultimately in a report with recommendations based on the input received back to the Board of Supervisors. That is how this Group was constituted and the direction the Group is going.

Reverend Williams said she received a letter yesterday about this meeting. She didn't have a whole lot of time to prepare or to speak with the congregation before coming there. She wanted to show up and be present. For her people justice is best served when all people are being best served. In their community of Saratoga Springs she has only been there for seven years. In that very short time, she moved from Syracuse, she found Saratoga Springs to be very hospitable, extremely inviting. People who live here are genuinely happy and that is how it felt to her. Until she was at a school board meeting. She went because one of her parishioners was on the school board in Saratoga Springs. While she was there they were discussing the issue of disarming police in the schools. She went to meeting because one of her parishioners was being threatened. Her very life was being threatened. She went to be a person of support. She said while in that meeting the level of divisiveness that was in that room was astronomical to her. Never in her life has she feared walking from a high school to her car. She had someone walk her to her car. She called the school board member's husband and told him he needed to come. She didn't think the member was safe. And that is not the kind of community Saratoga Springs has nurtured through the years. She thinks that is a reflection of our nation of our world. The level of divisiveness.

Mr. O'Connor asked if in her experience with the school board meeting on the arming of the police or not did she detect any kind of racial component to the divisiveness. Reverend Williams said that is a very interesting question. It is interesting because the woman who is her parishioner is married to a black man who was walking through a huge wall of white men and she feared for his safety. She met him at the door. So yes, she did feel there was a racial component. Mr. O'Connor asked if there was any kind of aggressive action or words taken against him. Reverend

Williams said not that she saw or heard. What she did hear was a whole lot of name-calling. People weren't supposed to be speaking unless they had the microphone. She was with another clergy person who took three minutes on the floor. She didn't plan to speak. But as the clergy people and you put a microphone in front of one of us, she said she stood at the microphone with him because he was very anxious as well. He said Heather do you have anything to say, after thirty seconds. So there was two and a half minutes left of his three minutes. She did speak. She spoke to the level of nastiness and mean spirit and how all the people at the school board level have children in the same school you do. For you to call all of them names and curse and swear in a public forum. Where she comes from she has lived in places that were not safe. That space was the most unsafe she felt in a public setting. She has been in the most poverty-stricken places in Syracuse and still didn't have someone walk her to her car.

Dr. Prezioso said he wonders as part of that or any other experiences, similar to a question that DA Heggen asked a bit ago, as part of that experience or other you may have had with your parishioners, have they related experiences with law enforcement that would be applicable in the context of this Group.

Reverend Williams said that is very interesting. Over the last year and a half they have been developing a more intimate relationship with their sister congregation and they have been doing a lot of anti-racism work with them. They have been doing studies and listening to stories then listening to the members of her congregation and their stories. Warren Dart whose father was a Tuskegee Airman has never been asked by Saratoga School District to come and tell his story. He has worked for the School District and retired from there. To her knowledge, he was the only black teacher in Saratoga Springs. Doralee Snyder who is also a prominent member of Saratoga Springs and key leader has experienced racism. At the mall someone hit her car. She is an older woman. A young man who is white hit her car. The police officer let him go. Didn't give him a ticket, just let him go. And was going to let him go without getting his insurance information. So she would say yes, there have been people who have had a lot of experience not all negative either. She did have the Mexican consulate comes once a year. They need a place where they can get appropriate documentation for workers in the community. The first time she held it at her church, because it was a big enough space, it was very close to the track. There were many folks, hundreds of people that got appropriate documentation, driver's license, passports. The first day there was a police car parked in the parking lot. She had to ask him to leave because the people that were coming were getting very anxious. This was four years ago. The climate four years ago was quite hostile toward the immigration population in our area. If you recall there were a lot of businesses that suffered during ICE raids. So she had to ask the police officer to park somewhere else and not in their lot. She said there is also a large AA community that gets anxious. They were meeting that day too.

Mr. O'Connor asked regarding the incident she had just described with the police officer and the collision, did she recall what police force was involved and was it in Saratoga Springs. Reverend Williams said yes it was in Saratoga Springs. Mr. O'Connor asked if it was a Sheriff or the Saratoga Springs police department. She said she did not know. She said she thinks that Saratoga Springs has a lot of places of commonality and a lot of places of support. The most incredible thing she was able to witness was when Karen Gregory who is the head of Code Blue and doing work for Shelters of Saratoga needed \$50,000 to house the Code Blue homeless population in the Holiday Inn. She needed it right quick. She was able to get people to donate \$50,000. The people of Saratoga Springs come together and support one another. And how do we make sure all the voices are at the table, everyone is being heard, seen and valued. She thinks that is what is at stake in all of this. That everyone is seen, heard and valued.

Ms. Heggen thanked her for coming. She said a question that she had posed just before the Reverend Williams arrived was she thinks part of the mission of the Group to try to collect information to make recommendations has to do with different entities of organizations interaction with policing. She thinks members of the faith community often can potentially be approached by people she engages with and supports whose lives have been impacted and involved in the criminal justice system. Similarly to her example of the parking lot but it could be people involved are accused of crimes, they can be victims of crimes and they can be witnesses of crime. One of the goals she has for this is to gather whatever information she can about where we can do better in informing the public about different things. How can we help you help the people that come to you, she guesses is her question, bottom line. She said she believes that understanding a process can help so whether that is something providing assistance from a faith-based perspective or maybe there are people going to Reverend Williams with particular issues or problems. Over the course of her years she has had members of faith based communities supporting the people she sees in her office. She said not understanding a process can put people at a disadvantage. Ms. Heggen asked Reverend Williams if she thought that

would be helpful. Reverend Williams said one of the things her church does is have a discretionary fund. Through COVID they went through \$40,000 giving it to people in need. Through that they had to learn the right process. So now they have a relationship with Catholic Charities and different organization so the process is solid. So that they are not competing but sharing resources. As far as this work goes, absolutely. Understanding the process and having that be very transparent would allow her folks to get involved and have a more clearer opinion of where they stand and what they support. Ms. Heggen asked if she had any suggestions. Reverend Williams said this conversation would be wonderful if it could be hosted at a house of faith. Where people can be in conversations with this Group and the decision makers. So they can be seen, heard and valued in this process. Due to the pandemic she suggested a zoom meeting versus an in person meeting. The more transparent during the process the better. Ms. Heggen said the pandemic has brought about many challenges. She said the survey referenced in the letter that is online could be shared, the notes from other meetings are online, the Executive Order which is where this group gets its charge from, again the desire to share information. The Group is trying the best they can to figure out different ways. Reverend Williams said the letter she received from Ms. Heggen got her attention. Now that she has the information she can easily distribute the information and share the link on her website. Ms. Heggen thanked them for coming.

Reverend Williams shared a positive experience she had with the Saratoga Springs police department. There was a young woman who escaped BOCES. She was sitting under a tree at the church but wouldn't speak to her. So she called the police department. She said two female police officers sat with this young woman for over an hour until they were able to get her to communicate. She didn't want to leave on a negative note.

Mr. Richardson thanked her for coming. He said he believed the Saratoga Springs Police Department would be doing something similar to what this Group was doing. It should be happening now or will be happening soon. Ms. Heggen said they have been engaged. She added each police agency in NYS has been directed to do this. This Group was constituted and formed as a result of the Saratoga County Sheriff's Department initiative but she has been contacted by other agencies. She said she believes Commissioner of Public Safety Dalton's office have been involved. They are engaged in similar discussion. Mr. Richardson said that was his point was that something should be happening right in City Hall.

Dr. Prezioso thanked them for coming and encouraged they to continue to find ways to engage. We all look forward to continuing this.

Mr. Blumenberg asked what the socio-economic make up of her congregation is. Reverend Williams said they are a suburban congregation for sure with some folks on the lower end of the economic scale. And that's the beauty of Saratoga Springs because this congregation truly shares their resources with each other.

Dr. Prezioso said he wanted to go over additional items that were on his agenda. He thanked the Pastors for being on the call and let them know the Group was going to be talking about schedules if they wanted to leave the meeting at this time. The Pastors thanked the Group and hung up.

Dr. Prezioso said he had a brief conversation with a reporter from the Hill Country Observer about where we are and where we are going. Once he has a copy of the article he will pass it around for the Group to see. He drafted and had marked up a press release of the actions of the Group and has gone out to the press. He thinks Gramercy got an email back from the Times Union and he did notice that he also got an email from a reporter. Word is getting out and people are starting to ask questions. He thanked the Group for their efforts to get the word out, for the outreach and contacting stakeholders.

Mr. O'Connor asked if the Group wanted him to send the revised draft of the simplified survey to the two school superintendents, they have been dealing with to take them up on their offer to take a look at it, revise it if they think it needs it and then get it out to the students.

Dr. Prezioso said he would be comfortable with that. Ms. Heggen said the more input the Group gets the better. She said during this meeting she had received communications from a Times Union reporter who is listening in. She hopes there are other people on the line that are continuing to disseminate information.

Mr. O'Connor said he would send the revision to Superintendent Slentz and Robinson today.

Dr. Prezioso asked Mr. Hartnett about the report process and developing that report on a rolling basis. Mr. Hartnett said we are on a time line with the deadlines imposed by the Executive Order and the report going out for public comment and then ultimately to the full Board for any resolution deemed appropriate. He thinks it may be prudent to start the bones of that report and then fill in as we go with the comments. He is willing to take a crack at it so that once it comes time to have a discussion we have a hit the ground running approach.

Mr. O'Connor said that is a great idea and thanked Mr. Hartnett. We are in a time crunch and getting a jump on that is a terrific idea and acknowledged that is a boatload of work.

Mr. Hartnett said he will take a crack at it with no expectation that it is adopted or used but just as a bones of the report that the Group will add the meat to. He is thinking the Group should be moving to the discussion about the recommendations phase in January, and then for public comment in early February. Dr. Prezioso thanked Mr. Hartnett for offering to do that. He asked if we need to be more specific with the dates on the timeline. Mr. Hartnett said right now the comments are about the policies and procedures; the comments that come after the report are going to be based on the Group's recommendations. He thinks anyone who wants to comment on the process or procedures, shouldn't hesitate to do so now. Once the Group issues the report, the public comments are largely going to be directed towards the Group's recommendations. All of the steps that have been taken have been fantastic including the website, email links and the groups that have come. Any and all comments that the Group can get will help the process. Ms. Heggen asked if it makes sense to establish a set timeline with dates. Dr. Prezioso said he appreciates that because he thinks the Group is at the point where we need to start thinking about specific deadlines. Mr. Hartnett said his suggestion would be the end of the month depending on what additional groups will be invited. He said comments through the survey should be taken through sometime the beginning of the year as it will take time to get the information together. This Group will have to meet, sift through the information to come up with the recommendations, which will take a couple of meetings.

Dr. Prezioso said next week this Group's will be meeting Thursday, December 10th at 3:00pm. An invitation was sent to the Supervisors to make it known to them. Mayor Putman has already responded as well that he would like to be present. Dr. Prezioso hoped that the Supervisors that have villages if they could reach out to the Mayor's that would be helpful.

Dr. Prezioso said he wanted to update the Group on the receipt of an email from one of the co-founders of the Saratoga Immigration Coalition. He said he met with her and a colleague to learn about the process and speak more in depth how we can go even further to get community participation. They have connection with unique sets of groups. We have had the human services, faith based, school superintendents and they are compiling contact information for some of the groups they work with so that he can do some outreach to them. He suggested those groups to come on Wednesday, December 16th. He said if this is the community group and we have gone through the others that were identified as part of the Order, will that be our final meeting or is there another set of stakeholders we should be speaking with.

Mr. O'Connor said with high school students it might remain to be seen. Once we get the survey finalized and out to grades 9 to 12 in the County we might know whether the superintendents advise a session in the Board Rooms where we could take comments. But the survey may be sufficient. He's just not sure yet.

The Group decided to hold a meeting on December 30, 2020 to act as a catchall or a wrap up. The meeting would be for anyone who wasn't able to make the other meetings or perhaps didn't fit in any of the other groups or the students, as they will be off from school.

Mr. O'Connor asked if anyone knew if the other Supervisors have put the information out to their town boards and villages. He said it might be good to send a reminder so there is no risk of some elected officials or mayors not knowing they were invited. Dr. Prezioso will draft an email to be sent out through the Clerk's Office.

Dr. Prezioso asked if there was a Committee of the Board that this would be presented to or would it be a report back to the Chairman. Mr. O'Connor said if there was a Committee he would say Public Safety. He thinks it would be a good idea to run it through that Committee before it goes to the Board. Mr. Richardson said yes, without a doubt.

Dr. Prezioso reviewed that the meetings will be finished up the first week in January, taking January to draft comments/recommendations, present to Public Safety in February, public comment and adoption in March.

Mr. Hartnett asked the Group members to send him a summary of who was contacted so he can include that in his report.

On a motion by Mr. Richardson, seconded by Mr. O'Connor, the Group unanimously adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Pamela Wright
Clerk of the Board