

Panel discusses community distrust of police



Jessica Masulli Reyes, The News Journal 7:42 a.m. EDT March 26, 2015



(Photo: WILLIAM BRETZGER/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

A national conversation on police-community relations erupted last year after a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, killed an unarmed black teen.

That conversation continued at Widener Law on Wednesday night as the Black Law Student Association hosted a panel that included Wilmington Police Chief Bobby Cummings.

"There is a rift in our society and instead of being in a situation where both sides refuse to come together, I wanted to create a space where we can all ask the questions we need to and begin to heal as a society," said Andre Mason, who moderated the panel discussion and is president of the association.

Wednesday's event drew about 20 people who sparked discussion on how to create trust between the police and communities they serve, whether it be through police wearing body cameras or being more transparent about officer discipline.



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Wilmington Police Chief Bobby Cummings

(<http://www.delawareonline.com/story/firststatepolitics/2014/12/22/markell-naacp-body-cameras/20768463/>)

Panelist Nicole Barkley, an assistant dean and multicultural affairs officer at Widener Law, said during the panel that the mistrust of the police, especially in the African American community, is historically rooted. The issue came to the forefront last year when a grand jury decided not to indict the officer who fatally shot 18-year-old Michael Brown in August.

"For some communities, it runs very deep and maybe it is on both sides," she said.

Many on the panel called for greater transparency from the police when the public is questioning how an officer handled an incident.

The News Journal reported this month on two Wilmington police officers who shot and gravely wounded a 24-year-old Georgia man during a January traffic stop. Police initially said at the scene the suspect fired at the officers, but later recanted, saying the man pointed a gun but never fired.

Local officials from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People have called for an independent review of the shooting.



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(<http://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/crime/2015/03/22/wilmington-police-aim-break-silence/25207437/>)

Assistant Professor of Legal Methods Sydney Howe-Barksdale, a panelist, said distrust in the police could be eliminated by the disclosure of more details in these types of internal investigations.

"It is hard to trust when we don't have the facts before us," she said. "If we don't have access to information how can we come to any reasonable conclusion."

Richard Morse, the legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Delaware, agreed.

"Trust would be so much enhanced if reports were public," he said. "And most of them you look at and say 'the officer was right,' but some no."

Cummings disagreed. He said not all reports should be made public for privacy reasons. He said internal affairs handles all incidents and that a citizen review board is not necessary.

"What we try to do, since I've been chief, is when a person gets into a situation and they believe they were wronged by an officer, there are systems in place," Cummings said. "The only way we don't deal with it is if it never comes to light."

Wednesday's discussion also turned to the pros and cons of body cameras to record community-police interactions. Wilmington police have body cameras available, but have not implemented a system where officers are wearing them yet.

Cummings said the city police want to make sure they can properly store the data and have policies in place for when the cameras should be on and off before they equip the officers.

Leon Williams, an attorney and graduate of Widener Law, said cameras give a false sense of security.

"You can have something on camera, but unless you have an accountability system in place ... it is not going to do any good," Williams said.

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