

BAKERSFIELD COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS

Community engagement is a foundational requirement for the Stipulated Judgment (Judgment) between the City of Bakersfield, the Bakersfield Police Department and the California Department of Justice (CALDOJ). This requirement is designed to enhance the Bakersfield Police Department's (BPD) relationship with its community through - among other things - increased transparency, improved collaboration and a demonstration of the Department's responsiveness to community needs and priorities.

Community engagement is widely regarded as imperative to police reform and improved policing. The more informed a law enforcement agency is, the more likely it is to understand and meet community expectations. The more engaged the community a law enforcement agency is with its communities, the greater the opportunity to enhance public awareness and understanding of policies, practices, and basic elements of the law while at the same time developing trusted relationships.

About the Stipulated Judgment

On August 23, 2011, the CALDOJ entered into a Judgment with the City of Bakersfield (City) and BPD. The Judgment lays out a series of requirements (police reform measures) that the City and the police department will make, based upon mutual agreement.

The process outlined in this Judgment focuses on ensuring the City and BPD protect individual statutory and constitutional rights, treat people with dignity and respect, and promote public safety consistent with community priorities.

The Judgment's goal is to enhance BPD's relationship with the community. The Bakersfield Monitor has identified that Full and Effective Compliance with a substantial number of the Judgment reforms requires a partnership between BPD and the community it serves – one in which BPD openly engages with the community, is transparent about its processes and provides community members with a voice regarding policing strategies.

Role of the Monitor

The Monitor's role is detailed within the Judgment and involves an evaluation of BPD's progress in implementing the changes and reform requirements. That is to say, we measure and report on BPD's progress under the provisions agreed to within the Judgment. We do this through data review, evaluation of policies and practices, observations, interviews, and public forums.

The Monitor continues to engage with the community with the goals to:

- Update and listen to community groups to continue building trusted relationships.
- Hear firsthand experiences and perspectives on policing, through open, non-attributional, facilitated discussions.



- Capture ideas to improve relations between the police and the community.
- Reiterate and explain the Judgment and the Monitor's role while also sharing a high-level overview of progress made to date.

To learn more and keep track of the work and progress made, please visit:

<https://www.bakersfieldmonitor.com/>

September Community Sessions in Bakersfield

The Monitor and Monitoring Team, in partnership with Bakersfield community leaders and organizers, held two community listening sessions on September 11 and 13, 2023. The locations were in the South and West regions of Bakersfield. The September Listening Sessions were intended to get a sense of what was being seen and felt within communities that often have high visibility or contact with BPD.

We welcome the opportunity to speak with community members and continue to do directly and as part of groups. The meetings, held in the evening and at two different locations to accommodate access to as many people as possible, were facilitated by members of the Monitoring Team (Team). The Team appreciates the help and support provided by community leaders, as well as the attendance and thoughtful dialogue provided by members of Bakersfield's communities.

This report provides a summary of the themes and sentiments shared in these discussions.

Session Overview

Each session began with an introduction of Team members, an overview of the Judgment, and a summary of progress to date. The participants were less than 20 in both locations, which provided an opportunity for a deeper exploration of the issues, their impact on the community and the perceptions of how BPD is doing under the reform program.

The Team led a facilitated discussion based on the following questions:

- Have you noticed a change in how BPD responds to calls/engages with the community?
- Can you tell BPD is working on reform efforts outlined in the Judgment?
- What police practices still exist that don't serve the community well and what changes have been made that better serve the community?
- What more can BPD do to demonstrate its commitment to change?
- What other actions/activities would you like to see take hold?
- How can the Monitor better support community awareness of reform efforts?

Sessions Summary

The discussions and issues raised at both meetings were similar. Therefore, we have summarized the content of both meetings into one document. Notably, there remains a consistent belief that BPD officers



do not police the same way in all neighborhoods. Residents in those communities that face economic distress and higher levels of reported crime do not feel the police are there to help solve problems. Rather, the session participants identified the police response does not help victims reporting crime. They stated that police officers, and the department generally, does not engage with community members to help prevent and solve crime. Participants stated that officers are not willing to treat them as having a voice or perspective that matters. Notably, it was identified that in certain communities, even low-level issues have a high number of officers responding and the lack of listening and distance with victims and community only increases when there are more officers on the scene.

BPD's calls to service/interactions with the community

The personal stories and anecdotes shared with us centered on over-policing and under-policing by BPD. The perspectives shared the belief that the response varied and was dependent on the neighborhood and/or the community requesting service.

For example, we heard several stories where a community member called for police service - in one case regarding a missing person - and received no follow-up attention. Others identified the BPD response came either a day or several days after the initial call for service - sometimes taking as long as a week. In other circumstances, a call for service could result in six or more officers arriving for a relatively minor call for service.

According to attendees, officers are often dismissive or argumentative. Some clearly believed that officers made assumptions based on affiliations, family connections, and race/ethnicity, even when the call for service was not related to an enforcement action. Others stated they have not experienced such behaviors, but noted they did not live in the areas where this type of behavior was reported more frequently.

Community comments included:

- It could be days before BPD responds or, in some cases, no response, even in emergencies.
- Officers display condescending behavior and tone. Community members believe they are treated based on how they look and speak. It was identified that if you're in a poor neighborhood, you're treated differently - no pleasantries or general respect is offered.
- One person identified their car was stolen and after calling to report it, when BPD arrived, rather than focus on information needed to assess the crime and locate the car, officers asked if drugs were in the car. Persons in attendance agreed that officers make negative assumptions based on perceived status – often related to race and the community - and stick to them.
- Persons living in neighborhoods with known gang members are treated differently, and the response is very different - even if the caller isn't in a gang or reporting gang activity.
- There was a consistent belief that the police treat people as though everyone is a criminal. They treat people without respect.
- "It's like you don't matter if you live in certain neighborhoods."



Visible outcomes of reform

When we asked if people could tell that the Department was working towards changes outlined by the Judgment, we heard from most attendees that police interactions and behaviors have not improved. Community comments and perceptions were that BPD does not believe it needs to improve and that it has not taken ownership of Judgment requirements.

Community comments included:

- They've denied any wrongdoing and responsibility for previous actions. They said as much in their statement discussing the Judgment. How can we expect them to demonstrate change when they don't believe they have to?
- Their attitude is worse since the Judgment. They don't feel it should have happened – it's hard for BPD to accept that they have to change.
- Since the Judgment went into effect, there hasn't been much communication regarding what's happening. There's a lack of communication regarding the process and the policies being changed.
- The Department hasn't taken ownership or assumed any fault for why they're under a Judgment.

Police practices that work and those that do not

The Team inquired about police practices – those that have changed to better serve the community and those that need to change since they no longer serve the community well. We hoped to learn if the Department has been able to successfully gauge and understand community expectations and its ability adjust to meet new and/or growing community needs.

The responses from attendees varied. However, two underlying themes emerging, both confirming what we have seen elsewhere in policing – the individual officer has a direct impact on public perceptions of policing and those of the law enforcement agency.

- How the responding officer acted directly influenced the community member's perception of the services received. Knowing a police officer had a big impact, implying a pre-existing relationship positively affected the interaction. Helpful and professional service by officers was acknowledged and appreciated. Collectively, the groups identified officers that provided a good service and there was shared consensus on a few officers.
- The groups also discussed negative interactions where the officers demonstrated poor behavior and actions bordered on potential misconduct. These actions weighed heavily in the discussions. Hostile interactions with rude or condescending behaviors by a police officer have a lasting impression. Community members feel they are without power and do not believe the police were there to help them. When questioned why they did not complain after such interactions, almost every participant stated because they felt it would not change and would put them at risk for retaliation. Some identified that they were retaliated against for complaining.

Community comments included:



- There is a lack of compassion or being human from officers, especially in certain neighborhoods.
- Sometimes, it feels like they're flexing their power even when it is not necessary.
- Some police officers are helpful, and some are just bad officers.
- It's always an us-versus-them feeling when you come into contact with BPD – even if you know the involved officers.
- BPD/Kern County doesn't follow stated procedures and policy.
- They treat you like you're less than them.
- They don't follow the law but want others to do so. They searched my vehicle even after being made aware they didn't have the right to.
- When BPD are at an event, they sit in a huddle, don't interact with people, and won't speak or look at you. This left the community questioning why they were there – as it is not sending an inclusive message.

Holding the Department Accountable

Given the discussions around the less-than-favorable police interactions among the people we met and heard from, we asked if they knew and understood how to file a police complaint. Many noted it was too burdensome due, in part, to a clunky and not user-friendly system. Others shared their fear of retaliation, especially since an alternative to the online complaint system required filing in person at the police station.

Community comments included:

- I tried to intervene when I saw cops brutalize and threaten to shoot someone already on the ground. A burly officer shoved and kicked me in the back, knocking me to the ground and threatened to arrest me.
- They try and intimidate you.
- I'm afraid to go to the police station, I fear retaliation because I know they do. They come after you.
- Officers behave like they're above the law. They are tough on crime but quick to protect themselves.
- I don't trust the police, I don't know if they will cause harm or place me under false arrest.
- In fact, one community member identified specifically that they believe a complaint about a BPD officer resulted in the subsequent arrest and incarceration of the complainant.

Areas of improvement: What [more] can BPD do to demonstrate its commitment to change?

The groups were hopeful for the Judgment and the monitor process, including the California Department of Justice oversight. However, there was general skepticism about whether change is possible. Generally, there was not a belief that change would occur and that it has taken too long already. However, collectively they wanted to see change and had ideas about what could improve police community relationships.



Community comments included:

- There are no resources for the kids in the neighborhood. They need parks, skate parks, and programs to keep them off the street and out of trouble.
- Have respect for the occupants of a home. BPD makes an arrest and is often disrespectful and unprofessional towards the family present.
- Most arrests are not for violent crimes but for crimes of poverty or traffic-related incidents. All arrests are not the same.
- Stop intimidating and beating people because they are/were known gang members.
- Hold officers to some standard - and do something to break the generational fear of police.
- We need to see change instead of hearing about it. We need to show they're here to help.

Areas of improvement: What [more] can the Monitor and Team do to support community awareness of reform efforts?

This was an area that was less focused in the discussion. The role of the Monitor was described and people sought to understand what is the benefit of a monitoring process. Generally, the presence of outside reporting and visibility was seen as helpful – even if the short-term improvement is not visible.

Community comments included:

- Continue to hold meetings like this and listen.
- Get the word out regarding the Stipulated Judgment and help educate the community.
- Encourage more investment in our communities instead of this police department.
- Help improve the complaint process.