



MINUTES
SPECIAL COMMISSION FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES - REGULAR SESSION
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2023, 1:00 PM

The Special Commission for Safe Communities convened in regular session at 1:00 PM, December 28, 2023. called the meeting to order.

Roll Call

Attendee Name	Title	Status
Timothy Harris	Commissioner	Present
Scott Denton	Commissioner	Present
Elizabeth German	Commissioner	Present
Aron Klein	Commissioner	Present
Cathy Lust	Commissioner	Present
Kaitlyn Selman	Commissioner	Present
Jay Shannon	Commissioner	Absent

Staff Present: Remote attendance Commissioner Selman

Commissioner Denton made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Lust, to approve the item as presented Motion for remote viewing. directed the clerk to call roll:

AYES: Shannon; Selman; Klein; Harris
Motion

Commissioner Denton made a motion, seconded by , to .
directed the clerk to call roll:
AYES:
Motion

Public Comment

Individuals wishing to provide emailed public comment must email comments to publiccomment@cityblm.org at least 15 minutes before the start of the meeting. Individuals wishing to speak in-person may register at cityblm.org/register at least 5 minutes before the start of the meeting.

No public comment

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Denton made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Lust, to Approve minutes.
directed the clerk to call roll:
AYES: Selman; Klein; German; Harris

Motion

The following item was presented:

Item 4.A. Consideration and action to approve the Minutes of the November 28, 2023, Regular Special Commission for Safe Communities Meeting

Commissioner Denton made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Lust, to approve the item as presented. Approve the minutes directed the clerk to call roll:

AYES: Selman; Klein; German; Harris

Motion carried (viva voce).

Regular Agenda

The following item was presented:

Item 5.A. Presentation and Discussion by Sgt. Nowers regarding community outreach as it relates to gun violence.

- Sgt. Nowers provided an overview of the Bloomington Police Department's Community Engagement Unit.

The idea behind this unit is that it will reach out and build trust within the community, especially with those that have had bad or no relationship with law enforcement. The unit meets with various members of the community and answers questions. To date, Sgt. Nowers said there has not been a single negative interaction. The unit is only two years old and did about 231 events in its first year. So far this year, they have done about 346 events. He stated that it is important to build trust in the community because they will be more likely to work with us. Due to many of the events going on nationwide, detectives were seeing a lack of cooperation from the community when it came to all types of crime including violent crime and homicides.

The Community Engagement Unit attempts to build a personal relationship with the community during these events. One way they will do this is by informing members of the community about what they can expect during a traffic stop, a car crash, when they are a victim of a crime, etc. Answering questions that there may not be time for the officer to answer on a call. The Community Engagement Unit provides a safe space for people to ask tough questions.

For some the uniform can be a barrier so there are some instances where Sgt. Nowers will wear plain clothes to make himself more approachable. Then, when going to day cares, preschools, junior high school, or grade schools, he will wear his uniform because it is fun and exciting for them to see the uniform and a police car.

Another thing the Community Engagement Unit has done is teach de-escalation training to officers to help them earn the public's respect and increase the willingness of victims and suspects to talk with the police. He emphasized that we can't control what officers are going to do elsewhere, but we can control what people are going to think of when

they look at Bloomington. They will know that those things will never happen here, and, even if they did, they would be handled the right way.

Sgt. Nowers spoke to many of the outreach efforts to minority populations in the community and several educational presentations that have been done to help reach out to different groups in the Bloomington Normal area. He also spoke to how the unit was created after Chief Simington was faced with five homicides shortly after being named chief. Sgt. Nowers was tasked with meeting with area stakeholders from organizations such as Project Oz, the Regional Alternative School, Western Ave Community Center, the Boys and Girls Club and several others. The group identified a need for more structured events for youths in Bloomington. They also discussed what has been working well with the School Resource Officers. All of the School Resource Officers identified the Project Oz Mentors as something that has been working well. They said the mentors regularly have a line in the hall. One example provided was that there was fight one day at school that they were having trouble breaking up. When one of the Project Oz Mentors approached the kid stopped fighting and broke down in tears. Building these relationships is key. Relationships with teachers, students, and their families so that they trust us when problems come up.

Another success has been the Regional Alternative School. Over the last five years the Regional Alternative School has transitioned away from being a place kids go before they go to the juvenile detention center. Now, kids who come back from the Regional Alternative School are coming back as fantastic students who are on the right path.

Sgt. Nowers has also provided de-escalation training to teachers, bus drivers, and Project Oz.

Sgt. Nowers said the goal is to make everyone feel connected to the community and build trust with the police department. He said people who feel more connected to the community are less likely to do crimes against it. When you see an officer you think about the relationship you have with the officer and how disappointed they would be if they saw me doing this.

Sgt. Nowers closed and asked if there were any questions.

- Commissioner Denton asked who was in the Community Engagement Unit.

Sgt. Nowers advised he has four other officers that he has access to but that they have other full-time jobs in the police department as well. He advised he is trying to get more participation from other officers in the department. He said its the job of the Community Engagement Unit to meet with people and break the ice. Once that occurs, he will invite other officers to participate.

- Commissioner Denton asked what the plan was for 2024.

Sgt. Nowers said he wants to add more groups he hasn't gotten to. He wants to meet more people. He has met much of the leadership for these groups but would like to meet more of the people within the organizations. He identified wanting to attend

more youth events such as Trunk or Treats and meet with ISU/Wesleyan for outreach and recruitment.

- Commissioner Selman asked about the demographics of the five homicides mentioned earlier.

Sgt. Nowers said they were random involving a husband, wife and child, and the other involved a 16 year old who stabbed an 18 year old. He said we have had other shootings, but none of those resulted in a homicide.

- Commissioner Selman asked that if Project Oz was the largest connection to the age group of 16-20 year olds.

Sgt. Nowers said that they work with Project Oz quite often, but the School Resource Officers and Street Crimes Unit have the largest connection. The Street Crimes Unit in particular has the most contact with the members of that age group especially those who get in the most trouble and are violent.

- Commissioner Selman asked Sgt. Nowers how often they work with Normal.

Sgt. Nowers identified several larger events that he has worked with Normal on such as the Faith in Blue. He also stated he has a close partnership with ISU's Community Engagement Officer.

- Commissioner Selman commented that we should have a connection with Normal because no one really knows where the dividing lines are.

Sgt. Nowers advised that he is open to doing more events with Normal's Public Information Officer and Community Engagement Unit.

- Commissioner Denton asked what gangs are represented in Bloomington and what outreach has been done.

Sgt. Nowers said gangs were at their peak in the area in the 90s. Several joint operations did a good job of reducing their numbers. Then, in the early 2000's, they began to bounce back. Chicago gangs such as the Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, P Stones, and Latin Kings were the main driving force. This had predominately been controlled by the drug trade. Today we are seeing it is almost entirely related to neighborhoods and personal beefs that end in shootings. They may be quasi or loosely gang related but they are local names that they give themselves. They are based on beefs they have on social media, a rap video against one another will be created, and then they will shoot each other over it.

- Commissioner Denton advised that had been his experience as well, and that Bloomington did not seem to have the violent cycle of retaliation and selling drugs.
- Commissioner Denton summarized some of the things he believed Sgt. Nowers said we need more of to include structured events for teens, school resource officers, and school

mentors. He also reiterated that Sgt. Nowers said that the Regional Alternative School and de-escalation trainings are doing very well.

- Commissioner Denton asked what types of structured events he recommended.

Sgt. Nowers said that was probably not something that the police should take the lead on. He said the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, YWCA, and Western Avenue Community Center may be better resources for those recommendations.

Sgt. Nowers also wanted to point out that the School Resource Officer Program has done really well. When there were calls to defund the police and remove officers from schools, the police department saw none of that locally. When asked, one of the School Resource Officers told him it was because they are so embedded in the schools and have such great relationships with the admin. They see themselves primarily as mentors and there to assist the teachers rather than enforce the laws.

- Commissioner Harris asked how staffing was going.

Sgt. Nowers advised that recruitment is down nationwide, but that Bloomington is still one of the most sought-after departments in Central Illinois.

- Commissioner Harris asked about the race and gender of the Community Engagement Unit.

Sgt. Nowers advised that diversifying the department is one of the Chiefs key missions. However currently, his team is comprised of 4 white males and one female. The recruitment team has added an African American Male, a Hispanic Male, and a female as well. He advised the department needs to be more reflective of our community so they feel more comfortable talking with the police.

- Commissioner Denton asked if Sgt. Nowers thought of the Community Engagement Unit as it being in a gun violence prevention category.

Sgt. Nowers advised it is more of a crime prevention category. It's a more grassroots idea of building trust in the community which will start to bring all crimes down through trust and cooperation in the community. If nobody is willing to be a victim or witness or be cooperative it will be hard to get crimes solved.

The following item was presented:

Item 5.B. Presentation and Discussion by A/Chief Veerman regarding data requested by the commission during the previous meeting. Topics include gun laws and statistical information on gun violence.

- A/Chief Veerman responded to the inquiry regarding the current laws regarding the possession of firearms on a person's property or in a vehicle.

In Illinois, the primary laws regarding the possession of a firearm are covered under Unlawful Use of Weapons and other various laws in relation to the FOID Card. There is also The Child Safety Act also requires that guns be inaccessible to children under the age of 14.

- A/Chief Veerman provided the following responses from Intel Analyst Supervisor Jack McQueen regarding the questions from the commissioners from the previous meeting.
- Commissioner Harris - are gangs in Bloomington/Normal affiliated with Chicago, St. Louis or Indianapolis.

None of the above. Our gang problem was Chicago affiliated from 1990 until 2012. In 2012 we began the shift to hybrid gangs. These gangs are isolated to each city and do not share connectivity to other adult or juvenile gangs in other cities. Most cities across IL have a similar gang landscape. BN has at any given time between 4 and 6 hybrid street gangs.

- Commissioner Lust - clarify gun thefts from vehicles.

Guns that are left in vehicles, either in a garage, driveway or while parked on a public street/parking lot, should be stored in a "container" and kept out of view. Most, if not all guns taken in BN, from vehicles, are stored away from view and are happened upon during a run of the mill vehicle burglary. Burglars are not targeting vehicles for guns - they are coming across them while stealing other items from vehicles. To put this in perspective, we average only 6 guns a year (for past 3 years) taken from parked motor vehicles.

- Commissioner Sherman - do you have the numbers on accidental discharges?

In Bloomington we have 3 to 4 accidental discharges a year where someone calls it in to the police. Normally, the calls come in after the discharged round damages someone else's property, the gun shot is heard by another resident, or someone is injured. I am sure we have more than this that go unreported. These normally take place indoors but we get 1 to 2 a year on the street or in a vehicle.

- Commissioner Selman - where do these shootings take place? Where are the victim and suspects from? How do they find the victims?

Historically, shootings were taking place at or near the homes or apartments (complex) of a person involved in previous altercations with a suspect. These shootings were driven by gang rivalries.

Over the past three years much of this has changed. Shootings now take place anywhere the suspect finds his or her target (home, party, school, work, etc.). With the increased availability and carrying of firearms coupled with the culture of settling issues with guns, shootings are no longer planned. They just happen.

The great majority of victims and suspects are local residents to Bloomington or Normal. Victims are located through social media posts, common girlfriends, or just through sheer luck.

- Commissioner Denton - do we have shooting maps?

BPD publishes all serious crimes of violence including weapons violations on our public facing mapping system; LexisNexis® Community Crime Map. communitycrimemap.com

Any resident can see one year of data on the map to include our violent crime. In any given year, back to 1990, there is always a slightly higher preponderance of shootings on the near west side of Bloomington. Outside of that area, as you can see in this 365 day view of violent incidents, it is pretty spread around town:

- Commissioner Sherman - relationship between Domestic Violence and shootings?

Very seldom do we have an incident of domestic violence that involves the use or firing of a handgun.

- Commissioner Denton - suicide numbers?

These should come from the McLean County Coroner.

- Commissioner Harris - is BPD doing community outreach?

BPD no longer has a full-time civilian youth street outreach worker. BPD has had one in the past and BPD has worked with agencies in Bloomington back to 1990 that involve the making of referrals to outreach programs for youth involved in at-risk behaviors. Much of that work is currently done by our School Resource Officers. BPD continues to focus on gun safety, violence prevention and the provision of illegal gun tips through our social media platforms and anonymous text to tip system.

- Commissioner Shannon - can we get the data on relatives of victims, perpetrators, etc.? BPD does not have any information regarding their family trees unless it is pertinent to the criminal investigation of a shooting.

McLean County Probation would be the only Criminal Justice agency that may keep this type of information and that may only be related to juvenile cases.

- Commissioner Sherman - Are the ages of offenders/victims of gun violence the same or different in other area cities?

All cities are fairly similar right now with the exception of Peoria. Peoria is currently experiencing a significant increase in serious violence among young male populations.

- Final note from Mr. McQueen, 2023 will end as the first year Bloomington didn't have a homicide by gun since 2017. We will also end the year with 30 shootings in Bloomington vs. 42 in 2022. The number of people shot also decreased from 15 in 2022 to 9 in 2023 in Bloomington.

The following item was presented:

Item 5.C. Presentation and Discussion by Commissioner Denton regarding suicides and gun violence.

- In 2020, there were 24 and 15 of those were by gun. In 2021, there were 29 suicides and 12 of those were by gun. In 2022, there were 17 suicides and four of those were from guns. So far in 2023 there have been 24 suicides and 15 of those were from guns.
- A/Chief Veerman asked if those were for all of McLean County. Commissioner Denton said they were, but its mostly from Bloomington Normal.

New Business

- Commissioner Harris suggested having the coroner or deputy coroner present on the suicide statistics for the area.
- Commissioner Denton suggested that Commissioner Shannon speak about generational family violence.

- A/Chief Veerman suggested Jack McQueen come speak about investigative techniques and his historical knowledge of gun violence.
- Commissioner Denton suggested that Commissioner Selman speak about a research article.
- Commissioner Klein posed the question if there was a comprehensive inventory of community organization that could help inform us. Commissioner Selman offered to put this list together.
- Commissioner Denton inquired if Sgt. Nowers had any recommendations. He advised the head of the Western Avenue Community Center and the Boys and Girls Club would be good resources.
- Commissioner Harris suggested the head of the YMCA be asked to speak.
- Commissioner Harris suggested a representative from the NAACP be asked to speak.
- There were also recommendations for Youth Build by Commissioner Denton and a School Resource Officer by Commissioner Lust to speak over the summer.

Commission Member Comments

- Commissioner Denton proposed that an interim report be created after one year to inform the City Council what the commission has done since its inception.
- Commissioner Harris recommended that we be more intentional about the commissions scheduling and provide speakers a list of talking points because there is a limited amount of time at each meeting.
- Interim Report after 1 year. Get input from council for the second year.

Adjournment

Commissioner German made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Denton, to adjourn the meeting.

Adjourn. directed the clerk to call roll:

AYES: Selman; Lust; Klein; Harris

Motion

The Meeting Adjourned at

CITY OF BLOOMINGTON



Scott Denton, Chair



Aaron Veerman, Staff Liaison