

From the PES Confronting Racism Task Force:

The Legacy of Race and Policing

By John Marshall

On October 25th the Parkway Free Library held a panel discussion on the topic of race and policing. It was sponsored by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council. The moderator was Dr. James M Peterson, Professor of African Studies at Lehigh University. The panelists were:

- Kevin J Bethel, retired Deputy Police Commissioner
- Andrea Custis, CEO of the Philadelphia Urban League, until recently
- Councilman Curtis Jones Jr. 4th District
- Andrea Ritchie of NYC Barnard Center

After Kevin J Bethel retired in January 2016, he joined the Philadelphia School District Diversion Program. Its purpose is to help stop the school to prison pipeline. He said that whenever possible, instead of telling officers to go out and arrest “bad persons”, police must be given the proper tools. They must be aware of the effects of trauma, poverty, and mental health problems. They should consider referring youths to community experts. Mr. Bethel, who also favors the ending of cash bail, also discussed profiling.

Andrea Custis has worked as affiliate CEO of the Philadelphia Urban League. Her focus is community action for social and economic empowerment. She feels that this can be achieved by retraining and hiring adults and young people. She also cited “broken window policing” - the overreacting to minor infractions. As a result young people are afraid of the police.

Curtis Jones, Jr. is Vice Chair of the City Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs. He is also chair of the West Philly Public Safety Office. Because a youth’s first contact with police is so important, he strongly supports community policing. He said that his top three issues are acting on prejudice and fears, overcoming justice by zip-code, and early education.

Andrea Ritchie is head of NYC’s Barnard’s Center’s Research on Women. She is on the LGBT Advisory Panel that, along with other issues, focuses on LGBT women’s issues involving the police. She said the top three issues are racial and gender disparities in police reactions to calls, police sexual violence, and police contact with youth.

There was byplay between Kevin J Bethel and Curtis Jones, Jr. Mr. Bethel said that if the home environment is unstable, it is of vital importance that there be a good mentor. Mr. Jones commented that he was somewhat wild during his youth. Mr. Bethel playfully asked Mr. Jones to elaborate, though he declined. The effectiveness of body cameras was raised – especially the ability of officers to turn them off at critical times. Mr. Bethel replied that while it is unfortunately true that this happens, the technology is improving. One enhancement will automatically turn the camera on when the officer draws the weapon.

Ms. Custis was asked about how her career at Verizon prepared her for the Urban League position. She replied that she was deeply involved in community outreach (unlike the common

belief that corporations are impersonal). Mr. Jones and Mr. Bethel shared experiences of being stopped for “driving while Black. They said that if a Black male is driving a nice car, it is too often assumed that he might be involved in criminal behavior. Andrea Ritchie spoke about police sexual violence in general, but focused on attacks against minority and LGBT women. Mr. Bethel replied that he has been horrified by these transgressions.

A member of the audience raised the issue that too often officers are not convicted of crimes. Mr. Bethel responded that he is aware that the FOP fights to keep investigations in-house. He said that he favors an independent investigative authority. He allows that movement in that direction has been slow, but feels that the tide is changing.