



# TOWN HALL ON PUBLIC SAFETY

## PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND POLICING

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OFFICE OF  
POLICE OVERSIGHT



## BACKGROUND

- In 2020, the Office of Police Oversight (OPO) launched an initiative to address the concerns of community members living with disabilities and their experience with policing in Austin, Texas.
- In collaboration with the Mayor's Office, the Equity Office, the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, and community advocates, OPO hosted two community events to learn more about the experiences that people with disabilities—both visible and invisible—have with the Austin Police Department (APD).
- The Office of Police Oversight developed recommendations based on community feedback to improve interactions between community members with disabilities and APD.





# TIMELINE

JULY 10, 2020

Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities meeting in which committee members voiced concerns regarding the negative experiences that people with disabilities often have with law enforcement. Committee members objected to the lack of data on people with disabilities beyond mental health.

MAY 21, 2021

OPO hosted the first Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing, in collaboration with the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, the Mayor's Office, Equity Office. 42 community members attended virtually.

SEPTEMBER 27, 2021

OPO released the first Town Hall report

JUNE 25, 2022

OPO hosted the second Town Hall on Public Safety: People with Disabilities and Policing, in collaboration with the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities, the Mayor's Office, Equity Office. 75 community members attended this hybrid event.

OCTOBER 9, 2023

OPO released the Final Town Hall report



# TOWN HALL I

Facilitators asked community members to respond to the following questions:

- Who are you, what motivated you to come to this event, and what do you need to best communicate in this space?
- What is your experience with Austin police or law enforcement?
- What would it look like for you to feel safe when interacting with law enforcement?
- Can you identify ways that APD can improve your experience with police?
- What would you like to see discussed at the next town hall meeting?

Notetakers recorded responses from community members. During this event, OPO collected 196 responses from community members for analysis. The responses were aggregated and anonymized as qualitative data for analysis.





# QUOTES

“More Community engagement between APD and deaf community – regular opportunities or events where each side can get to know more of the other and what they each go through – Police would also be better served in having better access to interpreters.”

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“Some people have disabilities that are not physical and visible but still existent, and law enforcement may not understand that.”

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“I don’t call the cops. I am a rather large black man with a son with a disability, and it is not safe to do so for me. We’ve all seen the videos. It is a lot of risk that I am unwilling to take.”

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“For visually impaired individuals, no eye contact can be misinterpreted by police.”



## TOWN HALL I INSIGHTS

- Current law enforcement policies and practices are not designed for people with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities may be seen as a threat or viewed as dangerous by law enforcement.
- APD needs to utilize more training resources, improve communication, and increase engagement with people with disabilities.
- The outcome of police interactions for someone with a disability depends on whether an officer is aware of an individual's disability and need.
- There is an intersection of other identities among people with disabilities.
- When police are called to school systems, it disproportionately affects students of color with disabilities, creates an environment that may harm the student, and plays a role in the bigger picture of systemic racism in the criminal justice system.
- The lack of understanding, resources, and training for officers has negatively impacted individuals experiencing mental health crises.





# TOWN HALL I RECOMMENDATIONS

- The next event should focus on building a greater sense of empathy and understanding for people with disabilities. The impact a disability has on an individual's life should be part of the event planning and conversations at the event.
- When promoting the event, City staff should encourage and accommodate people with disabilities, especially those whose experiences also intersect with race, gender, class, and other social identities.
- Conversations held at the event should include ideas for community engagement between law enforcement and people with disabilities.
- Conversations held should also focus on the unique experiences that students with disabilities have in the education system.

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a white t-shirt and jeans, standing on a stage and speaking into a microphone. She is holding a piece of paper in her left hand. The stage has a dark curtain and some equipment visible in the background.

# TOWN HALL II

## TOWN HALL ON PUBLIC SAFETY II JUNE 22, 2022

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75 community members attended the meeting online and in person, including four APD officers and former APD Chief Joseph Chacon.

- The first discussion at the town hall examined an intersectionality table and encouraged attendees to identify how living with a disability can be more challenging when an individual is also a part of other marginalized communities
- For the second discussion, facilitators in the breakout groups asked questions to build an understanding of community members' lived experiences and gather feedback on how APD officers can improve interactions with community members.





# QUOTES

"When I get bad migraines, get fearful that an officer might pull up and think I'm under the influence, but really I'm just not feeling well. If students are under a lot of stress, they might have difficulty expressing themselves, and ka [sic] vocalization could be misinterpreted by officers. The staring off or absence of responsiveness of some seizures could be interpreted as ignoring a command from an officer. Make sure that officers are open-minded and have education about mental, physical, and other disabilities."

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"Disability isn't just one thing, there are so many things that don't present the same way. Thinking about situations like double amputees who has a wheelchair helper and being separated from them, are those things thought about are their policies regarding these types of actions? Knowing that every behavior is someone saying something, asking why's, what happened to your day, how are you doing? what I need to feel safe is a reimagining of these situations instead of just barking orders."

## ● FEAR AND VULNERABILITY

Community members with disabilities may feel vulnerable and powerless when interacting with law enforcement, contributing to an overall sense of anxiety and fear.

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## ● TRAINING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There are concerns that APD training is not inclusive of the various experiences of people with disabilities, which may lead to negative outcomes for community members.

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## ● UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERISTY OF DISABILITIES

There are assumptions about perceived levels of ability and a lack of knowledge about how both visible and invisible disabilities can be perceived.



# TO W N H A L L I I F I N D I N G S





A black and white photograph of a group of people sitting at a long table, likely at a town hall meeting. One person in the center is wearing a t-shirt that says "Mickey" and "Rose Fayette Coal Plant".

# TOWN HALL II RECOMMENDATIONS

## RESEARCH

- APD should collaborate with the City Manager and OPO to provide regular public updates on the implementation status of recommendations from various consultants and reports to improve interactions between people with disabilities and APD officers. This research has yielded insightful findings and many actionable recommendations.

This includes the 2018 Office of the City Auditor analysis of APD's mental health response, the 2019 Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute report, the 2021 Office of Police Oversight report on use-of-force, and the numerous reports submitted by Kroll Associates.



# TOWN HALL II RECOMMENDATIONS

## DATA

- APD should examine how it documents, measures, and publishes data on interactions between officers and people with disabilities, specifically how data is collected, categorized, and reported to the public. Currently, APD's publicly available data related to people with disabilities is focused on the interactions between APD officers and people with mental health conditions.
- APD should work with OPO to review complaints submitted by (or involving) community members who identify themselves as persons living with disabilities or mention key phrases, like assistive technologies or service animals.





## TOWN HALL II RECOMMENDATIONS

### DATA

- APD should collaborate with community members to develop more inclusive ways to collect data representing the diverse lived experiences of people with disabilities. People with disabilities are often underrepresented, particularly regarding data that captures the diversity of their lived experiences.



# TOWN HALL II RECOMMENDATIONS

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- APD should identify staff whose community engagement and outreach focus entails building positive relationships with people with disabilities to promote a more inclusive public safety landscape. The liaison should connect directly with people with lived experience and their support networks, like service providers, care providers, and family members, to seek insights and feedback from the community on how their needs could be better met by APD.
- APD should host multiple community engagement events each year to receive feedback directly from people with disabilities. These events should create a safe and inclusive space for people with disabilities to share their experiences, needs, and concerns with APD leadership.



The background of the slide is a photograph of a gallery or museum. On the left, there are two white panels with text. The top panel says 'People living without a disability' and the bottom panel says 'People living with a disability'. In the center, there is a large white rectangular area with a dark blue border containing the title 'TOWN HALL II RECOMMENDATIONS'. On the right, there is a person standing next to a large black screen or monitor. The overall color scheme is dark blue with white and light blue accents.

## TOWN HALL II RECOMMENDATIONS

### TRAINING

- APD should integrate relevant materials, including scholarly research, news articles, and writing by people with lived experience, into the APD training academy modules related to people with disabilities.
- Officers should be encouraged to pursue professional development and training opportunities that strengthen their ability to make meaningful connections with community members. APD should work with stakeholders to develop improvements to its professional training opportunities to equip officers with techniques and strategies to engage with community members with disabilities in alignment with national best practices in policing.



## NEXT STEPS

- Agencies cannot manage what they do not measure. High-quality data is necessary to evaluate policies. (*What Police Chiefs and Sheriffs Need to Know about Collecting and Analyzing Use-of-Force Data*, Police Executive Research Forum, February 2021)
- This research indicates an opportunity to build trust with the community by improving interactions and increasing engagement.
- OPO can support APD by facilitating conversations with community members.





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities
- ArtSpark Texas
- U.R. Our Hope
- SAFE Alliance
- Texas Parent to Parent
- City of Austin's Americans with Disabilities Act Program
- Former Mayor Steve Adler
- Former City Manager Spencer Cronk
- Former Chief Joseph Chacon (APD)
- Equity Office
- City of Austin's Communications and Public Information Office
- City of Austin staff volunteers
- Asian American Resource Center staff
- Lt. Lawrence Davis (APD)
- Officer John Gabrielson (APD)
- Officer Frank Creasey (APD)



## ACCESS THE REPORT

- Online: [atxpoliceoversight.org](https://atxpoliceoversight.org)  
Available in English, Spanish, and screen-reader compatible
- Print: Braille copies available  
Call 512-974-9090 to request a copy





OFFICE OF  
POLICE OVERSIGHT

# POLICE OVERSIGHT IMPLEMENTATION WORKGROUP

FEBRUARY 22, 2024 | 6:00 P.M. - 7:30 P.M.

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