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NAACP, Interfaith group members share experiences with area police

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NB and FR mayors and police chiefs invited, but only Fall River chief participates in forum to discuss police reform

When Moriah Wiggins made her way to an event in Fall River she was prepared for a fun and social evening, but instead she ended the night barefoot in a cold cell.

The UMass Dartmouth graduate and NAACP New Bedford Branch member was going to a school sanctioned event hosted by the college's African Students Association. Police arrived while she was waiting in line.

The police began to "aggressively move students to disperse," according to Wiggins, and she said her nightmare began when she asked an officer not to push her friend.

"In that moment I was only seen by my color, a color that was not worth respect or decency, I was just another black youth who had the nerve to question the people I expected to protect me, another black woman who wondered what I had done to deserve this," Wiggins said.

Two officers handcuffed Wiggins and pushed her up against a car, she said. "I was scared and crying...it seemed like I was being arrested as a show of force."

After being brought to a cell with her friend that night, eventually all charges were dropped, Wiggins said, but she was left with the trauma of that evening.

"It took me months to get over what really happened, to be able to share my story without wanting to cry," she said.

Wiggins, who graduated from UMass Dartmouth with a degree in bioengineering, said she describes herself as a community leader who always works hard and plays by the rules.

She shared her story Thursday night at a community action meeting on police reform and racial equity held by United Interfaith Action of Southeastern MA (UIA) in partnership with the NAACP, New Bedford Branch.

The purpose of the meeting was to bring elected officials and police chiefs together with the community to hear their experiences with police and address areas of police reform.

Both the Fall River Mayor and New Bedford mayor declined an invitation to attend the meeting, according to NAACP New Bedford Branch Vice President Renee Ledbetter, because they said the two cities are different, with their own unique issues that require different solutions.

Ledbetter said the purpose of the meeting was to bring two common cities together for common action and resolutions can't stop at the city line.

Elaina Pevide, a spokesperson for the Fall River Mayor's Office, said via email on Friday that as of Thursday evening Mayor Paul Coogan had not received an invitation to participate in the meeting nor did he or his office receive any correspondence or phone calls to confirm his attendance at the meeting.

"It was the mayor's understanding that last [night's] meeting was with the New Bedford and Fall River Police Chiefs," Pevide said, "We apologize for any misunderstanding and Mayor Coogan looks forward to future meeting with UIA."

New Bedford Public Information Office Jonathan Carvalho said Mayor Jon Mitchell agreed to attend a New Bedford forum put on by UIA, but that UIA declined to hold one specific to New Bedford and that it was accurate that Mitchell declined to attend Thursday night's meeting because it included both cities.

Both Carvalho and UIA confirmed that Mitchell participated in an earlier meeting with UIA and the NAACP New Bedford branch to discuss having the larger meeting held Thursday.

New Bedford Police Chief Joseph Cordeiro was originally scheduled to attend, but according to Ledbetter he later informed them he could no longer attend.

On Friday afternoon, Andrea Sheppard Lomba of UIA said via email, "I also wanted to underscore that from our initial engagement the city officials had agreed to meet with our organizations, they just ultimately wanted the meeting to

be separated by cities. So there was never an outright ‘no’ to meeting with us, it was a disagreement with the meeting happening with the two cities together.”

Ultimately, Fall River Police Chief Jeffrey Cardoza was the only official who attended Thursday night’s meeting to hear testimonials and answer the community’s questions about accountability and representation, demilitarizing the police, re-envisioning policing, and reinvesting funds.

Ledbetter encouraged the over 120 attendees to call and send emails to elected officials to voice their concerns and ask them why they didn’t attend.

Wiggins shared her testimony in a section of the meeting calling for the demilitarization of police.

“We need police to be community partners in public safety and not community warriors,” attendee Nancy Costa said.

Rhoda Purcell, UIA member and New Bedford resident, asked Cardoza if he would commit to supporting training officers at least once per year in implicit and racial bias, cultural understanding, and de-escalation.

Cardoza said that it is his intention to set aside part of the mandatory annual training for officers for training of that nature.

Later in the meeting Cardoza said that since he became chief, he’s been “preaching that we are guardians, not warriors, I don’t need warriors on this police department.”

UIA and the NAACP New Bedford branch members also asked Cardoza for his stance on civilian review boards with subpoena power, all police wearing body cameras, and a phone line independent of the police department where citizens could make complaints about police officers.

New Bedford Branch President LaSella Hall called attention to the recent decision by the Kentucky Attorney General’s office not to file charges against any police officers in the killing of 26 year-old Breonna Taylor in her own home, with only one officer indicted for reckless endangerment for firing into a neighbor’s apartment.

The decision, Hall said, evidenced that “The police cannot continue to police themselves.”

Cardoza said he was not in favor of a civilian review board with subpoena power, but is open to an advisory committee.

The mayor's office already receives phone calls about issues with officers, according to Cardoza, though there's not a specific line for complaints.

"Relative to the body-worn camera I would like to see every single police officer including myself have a body-worn camera," Cardoza said, and he's been discussing a pilot program with Mayor Coogan in which a group of officers would wear body cameras.

Throughout the night UIA and NAACP members continued to share their personal experiences with police officers while Cardoza answered questions about possible police reform.

Kelli Johnson, a UIA member, shared her experience teaching in New Bedford.

Johnson works at Whaling City Alternative School, where students who are removed from the traditional school system end up in New Bedford.

She described how students enter school every day by taking their shoes off before going through metal detectors and being patted down.

"It's like we're already preparing them for prison," Johnson said.

Johnson then described an incident she witnessed 15 years ago at Keith Middle School.

A School Resource Office (SRO) grabbed a young boy and slammed him to the floor.

"I could see the pleas for help as he looked into my eyes," Johnson said, "To this day I can still see his look of fear."

Johnson was using her experience to call for new ways to accomplish public safety, and called for the possibility of emphasizing the role of mentors over SROs at schools.

Cardoza said he is a huge proponent of the SRO program and supports it 100%, citing hundreds of situations he knows of in which SROs were able to prevent crimes from happening outside of the school due to their presence there.

"They know that they're there to build relationships, they're not there as armed guards," Cardoza said.

The chief did say he would be willing to get together with a group of people to discuss the SRO program, but he does not support eliminating the program.

Over the course of the evening Cardoza said he would work to use the Civil Service Waiver to increase diversity and allow the hiring of more bilingual officers and committed to 7 of 8 policies in “8 Can’t Wait,” a set of eight policies that a 2016 Campaign Zero study found can decrease police violence by 72%.

Mitchell and Cordeiro have already committed to the eight policies in New Bedford.

The one policy in “8 Can’t Wait” that Cardoza didn’t agree to was the officers be required to provide some type of warning before using deadly force.

Cardoza said he didn’t want to make an officer have to wait to announce his use of deadly force if he or she was under fire, since he didn’t think it would be fair to the officer.

UIA and NAACP New Bedford Branch members were clear that last night’s meeting was only the beginning.

“Tonight is a first step in a large step towards justice,” Ledbetter said.

