

Glastonbury holds conversation on juvenile justice

BY STEVE SMITH COURANT COMMUNITY

GLASTONBURY — The Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative recently held its first in-person community conversation in two years — this time, it was about juvenile justice reform.

With some high profile cases of auto thefts and related crimes taking place in Glastonbury over the past two years, the topic has been highlighted in the local community, due to the increase in the thefts that appear to be correlated to the pandemic.

Panelists for the June 13, event included Christina Quaranta, executive director of the Connecticut Justice Alliance; state Rep. Jason Doucette; Ken Barone, project manager with the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy at the University of Connecticut; Warren Hardy, founder and C.E.O. of H.Y.P.E. (Helping Young People Evolve); and Glastonbury Police Chief Marshall Porter.

Quaranta said that meaningful juvenile justice reform must include those affected by the system, and professionals who are “on the ground” working with families and children.

“[They] can tell you what needs to change in the system, and why, and how to do it,” she said, adding that the media portrays the crimes as mainly caused by Black and brown youth, but doesn’t look at what conditions cause them to act.

“How did they get here?” she said. “Nobody wakes up and chooses to make the wrong decision. Nobody wants to be bad. Nobody wants to be incarcerated or arrested. The solution to youth crime... is not more incarceration, is not more punishment, not more police on the street. The solution is addressing the root cause.”

That, Quaranta said, is learning what the issues are that cause young people to act criminally, whether it’s out of need, out of fear, or looking at what programs should be in place that aren’t.

“It’s important to look at what should be done, and what will be effective,” she said.

Barone provided data on what’s been seen in the state, and nationally, including that Connecticut was experiencing one of the lowest crime rates in 2019, including the lowest number of car thefts since they began counting them, in 1985. The first three months of 2020, the state continued on that downward pace, but in April of that year, two areas of crime— auto thefts and gun violence — began to rise again.

While cities such as Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford have had significant car theft problems for years, the thefts began branching out to the suburbs.

“Regionally, we weren’t seeing an increase in auto thefts, we were seeing a shift in where auto thefts were occurring,” Barone said. “There was really one primary driver of this, and Glastonbury was uniquely impacted in 2020.”

That factor, he said, was that people were less likely to lock their cars and/or secure their keys, because of the change in technology, specifically ignition systems.

Arrests, Barone said, only take place in less than 10% of auto thefts, and that hasn’t changed.

“We are not going to arrest our way out of this problem,” he said, adding that while juveniles account for approximately 60% of thefts, the low arrest rate means that tougher laws won’t make a difference.

Hardy said that when it comes to solving the problem, it has to be looked at as a life-and-death situation, but that the juvenile justice system also needs to be examined.

“We are addressing what a young person is doing, and not looking at why a young person is doing it in the first place,” he said, adding that other systems, including schools, home environments, basic needs, and others need to be looked at, as they are contributing factors to crimes.

“Another way to start addressing this problem is to examine the children who are not ending up in the juvenile justice system. What are the things that they have, or that they don’t have, that might be keeping them away from the justice system?”

Doucette said that more emphasis has been placed, lately, on programs both post- and pre-arrest, to try to prevent crimes before they happen.

“For me, I think the most important aspect is early intervention with our youth,” he said. “Pre-arrest for at-risk youth who need the help and support from their communities, and post-arrest for someone who has gotten in trouble, so they are able to get the attention from the juvenile justice system that they need – not incarceration, but the diversionary programs.”

Porter said Glastonbury has made strides to both prevent car thefts and other crimes, and to address mental health, school, employment, and other issues that lead to criminal behavior. But, he said, the state legislature needs to catch up.

“We did the easy stuff first. We legislated away the ability to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate some of the many offenders, including some of the more serious offenders. What we didn’t do was the expensive and difficult part, and that’s to have the programs in place that we’re all talking about to fill that void,” Porter said. “What’s missing, desperately, is an answer to, ‘What got them there?’ “

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