

# Columbus Community Trust: Proactive work to build Trust and Resilience

This case study tracks the volunteer-based Columbus Community Trust as it convenes, evolves, develops, and works to implement a structure—a structure which might assist the Columbus region to transform community division into forward looking action while planning in advance of civil unrest. The effort, which began in 2015, is convened by attorneys and dispute resolution practitioners.

Columbus Community Trust’s aim is to make the Columbus metropolitan region more resilient by advancing efforts to:

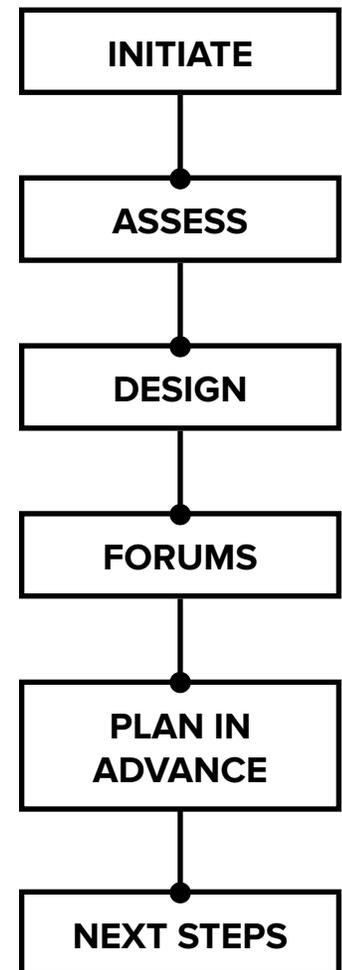
- Convene community stakeholders to understand deep community concerns;
- Build trust among residents and between leaders and residents;
- Identify/design processes to deal justly with constituency group concerns;
- Prepare the community to respond in resourceful and coordinated ways if an event occurs that challenges trust; and
- Develop shared plans for acting in the midst of civil unrest.

The Trust’s work is accomplished through a steering committee and a set of working groups which are further described herein. References to the “Trust” or “CCT” refer to the steering committee. The Trust’s work is based on the Divided Community Project’s guidance document, *Planning in Advance of Civil Unrest*.<sup>1</sup>

## INITIATE – A Coalition Emerges for Broad-based Community Planning

A diverse group of law-affiliated Columbus community leaders initiated what would become the Columbus Community Trust. Nancy Rogers and Josh Stulberg, two faculty from the Divided Community Project, housed at The Ohio State University’s Moritz College of Law began building momentum for the idea in the summer of 2015. Leveraging Divided Community Project guidance, Rogers and Stulberg reached out to leaders who might support a planning process which would build community trust and resilience: Carter Stewart, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Ohio; and, Carl Smallwood a respected local attorney who – among other initiatives – spearheaded an effort to combat statistics illustrating significant disparity between the number of minority and white attorneys at larger law firms.

With Stewart’s blessing, Rogers, Stulberg, and Smallwood met with the John Mercer Langston Bar Association (JMLBA) and Columbus Bar Association (CBA) leadership on a number of occasions in late 2015 and early 2016. Smallwood explained bar leaders ultimately decided to “step up” and recognize there are residents whose rights are not being addressed and who are not being heard. JMLBA (a minority bar associated affiliated with the National Bar Association) supported the idea of the Trust because members knew and trusted Smallwood and Rogers.



On April 14, 2016, with support from the CBA, JMLBA, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Ohio, and the Divided Community Project, a small group of attorneys met at a private law office to begin discussing what would become the Columbus Community Trust. Smallwood and representatives from the Divided Community Project joined a common pleas judge, an assistant prosecutor, a communications official from the U.S. Attorney's office, a criminal defense attorney, an immigration attorney, and the executive director of the CBA.

The group quickly realized attorney-based membership was insufficient to initiate broad-based community planning and considered how to expand. Members agreed they wanted to recruit participants who were willing and able to get things done, but wondered whether there was a distinction between those who can accomplish things formally versus informally. In a matter of weeks, the group developed a 30-name list of individuals to engage in the process ranging from the Mayor and law enforcement and other elected officials, to religious, advocacy, and education leaders. Throughout May and in early June, the group continued to develop a list of civic leaders to engage. Members expressed hesitation when considering officials up for election or re-election, asked who might be offended if they did not have a seat at—or were not invited to—the table, and considered whether it was appropriate to invite the Chief of Police for the City of Columbus to sit alongside a deputy from a different institution. One member suggested that the invitation to the Trust should be addressed to the organizational leader, but an alternative executive could attend on behalf of leadership.

In June 2016, Trust members were tasked with reaching out to approximately fifty identified community leaders to discuss the Trust's work and ask them to engage at a future date. Trust members reported favorably on their conversations with potential stakeholders—and turned the Trust's attention to expansion. In late July, eighteen attended an expanded Trust meeting, including nine new members. Seasoned Trust participants described the group as a “broad-based planning effort” in advance of civil unrest; and, an effort to prep the community for unrest and to listen for sources of conflict.

New participants again recognized that other voices should be part of the Trust's convening conversations. One new member asked the group to take a trauma-informed social justice approach to the project, urging the Trust to consider how to incorporate the voiceless into the design of the project. Another participant asked whether the Trust considered engaging a generation of younger leaders, asking how we populate a similar table for the next generation. All participants agreed that the Trust was fundamentally an attorney-oriented group, and the Trust “needs more people at the table.”

Throughout 2016 and 2017 the CCT's steering committee continued to slowly expand, inviting members from non-profit organizations like the YWCA and Columbus Urban League, and diverse religious organizations. The Trust's membership continues to slowly expand as new stakeholders emerge, but participants have also disengaged due to retirement, career changes, and perhaps the Trust's pace of progress.



## **A Preliminary ASSESSMENT**

Lacking resources to hire a professional to assess the community's ability to handle division, mediation-trained law students and faculty at The Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law quickly assisted in the development of a preliminary assessment. Conducting more than forty interviews, as well as accompanying historical research, the preliminary assessment addressed three topics: potential local issues which may divide the Columbus community; reasons for planning ahead; and, issues to consider when convening the right people for the CCT. The assessment provided information identifying how the trust might function; a toolkit for planning in advance of civil unrest; a two-page document identifying recent nationwide civil unrest, themes, and triggers; and a memo outlining the work of a similar planning group, the 1970's Metropolitan Columbus School Committee.

Smallwood described the tools in the preliminary assessment as “indispensable road maps.” Smallwood also points to the Divided Community Project's two-page toolkit for convening.<sup>2</sup> Initially “It was hard to see and measure progress” as the Trust “began to try to work our way from a dead stop to having a group large enough to think about getting this work accomplished.”

## **DESIGNING the Trust**

Relying on tools from the Divided Community Project and the “preliminary assessment,” Smallwood originally framed the conversation as an opportunity “proactively set up an infrastructure to stem violence.” One member suggested the Trust might have three components: a structure to alert the community of divisive issues; a venue for airing grievances and giving residents voice; and a forum for bringing residents together.

The Trust grappled with whether it would react to crisis or work to plan in advance of the next community crisis. The Trust's initial resolve was put to the test on September 14, 2016, when Tyre King—an African American teen—was killed by a white Columbus police officer who responded to a call about an alleged armed robbery for \$10. In its infancy, the Trust was not equipped to react in a manner to quickly support the community. Trust members considered whether the Columbus community had a process in place to continue to address underlying concerns – not exclusively and investigation about how King was tragically killed. Members considered whether the Trust was prepared to serve between the city and the community and asked how the Trust could support community conversations about the conditions that surround the lives of communities in need? The group appeared to arrive at consensus that the Trust should consider looking ahead, focusing on underlying issues and listening for broad community concerns.



To further hone its mission, in spring of 2017 the Trust engaged in the *Midland Simulation*.<sup>3</sup> Following the two-hour simulation the group engaged in a debriefing conversation which illuminated several themes: the need to do pro-active, rather than re-active work; engaging participants who traditionally do not have a seat at the table; identifying gaps in social services and communications; and taking the right tone to respond to a stressed community.

## FORUMS and Engagement

**[The Trust is an] opportunity to bring folks together. Just as you start to scratch the surface, you realize how many folks you need to engage in this discussion. This isn't a top-down approach. This isn't a plan that says this is how a community should react . . . this is a sustained conversation that doesn't just stop when our task force is done. . . . There are different moving parts . . . you cannot be dismissive or forget about cultural or diversity issues throughout the community."**

**– Jill Snitcher McQuain, Executive Director, Columbus Bar Association**

The CCT worked quietly for more than a year before taking significant steps to expand stakeholder groups and community outreach. The Trust uses three formal primary methods for community engagement: A) interface with City agencies; B) continued stakeholder expansion; and C) working groups.

## A. City Engagement

Several of the Trust's core members are appointed city officials from the Mayor's office, the city attorney's office, the City of Columbus Department of Neighborhoods, and other administrative divisions. The Trust regularly works to engage with the City through the City's CARE (Community Resilience) Coalition and the City's Community Relations Commission. Perhaps the Trust's most successful engagement effort was running the *Midland Simulation* with Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther, representatives from the Trust, and members of Mayor Ginther's staff (including police and cabinet-level officials). During the debrief City officials discussed the importance of developing relationships, building trust, and planning in advance of community crisis. City leaders brainstormed methods to enhance internal communications, work with other groups in the community, work with groups who make significant demands during a crisis, and engage in more broad-based community planning efforts.

## B. Stakeholder Engagement

The Trust regularly considers how to expand stakeholder engagement asking, "who is not at the table" during monthly Trust meetings. A pair of fall 2017 meetings are one example of the Trust's efforts to expand stakeholder engagement. Participants were encouraged to consider how the local organizations and government could engender trust across communities within the community. Designed to spur conversation about community division and identity, the Trust used the Divided Community Project's Community Preparedness and Assessment Test.<sup>4</sup> Some CPAT results were particularly striking. When asked if the community has "an identity that cuts across any community divisions and deals constructively with differences," zero respondents replied "yes, the identity is clear." When asked whether the community is "ready to deal with volatile situations stemming from community division," and if the community "deals constructively with division when compared to other communities," seventy-five percent of participants responded "this needs more focus and attention." None responded "this is one of our community's strengths." Likewise when asked if the community has "an early warning system to communicate about developing concerns" all participants responded "this needs more focus and attention."

## C. Working Groups

The Future Concerns / Communication Joint working group and the Readiness working group are both active. The Future Concerns / Communications joint working group initiated their work in January 2018, inviting community stakeholders to identify how the community is listening for and responding to divisive issues. Participants agreed that the "future concerns" working group should "try to put itself out of business", perhaps by weaving ideas for listening into currently existing structures. But new participants expressed some caution about the CCT, wondering how to connect suburbs to the Trust's conversations, whether the *right people* were listening to Trust conversations, and whether the Trust was "too establishment" to truly listen in the community. Others noted that many members of the community simply do not have the capacity to attend yet another meeting to express their concerns, particularly in light of prior community inaction. As a result of the joint working groups' initial efforts, the group asked university officials to help identify:

1. How have communities across the country "institutionalized listening" - how are communities sustainably and intentionally listening to residents?
2. How is the Columbus community currently listening through civic and non-for-profit structures?

A group of four law students in a clinical mediation course interviewed five experts in community engagement as a preliminary effort to begin answering the joint working group's questions presenting their findings at the May 2018 Trust meeting. The students organized their research into four themes: engaging broad stakeholder participants, multi-sector support, leveraging technology, building and maintaining trust. Trust members were empowered by the student presentation and asked university-affiliated members to conduct additional research. Perhaps more importantly, the students' work helped the Trust discuss how to move its work forward. In the summer of 2018, the Trust intends to convene a conversation between leaders of city and non-governmental organizations to consider how to improve—or what is missing from—their collective listening efforts.

## PLAN IN ADVANCE

The Trust's Readiness working group is charged with developing a community plan in advance of civil unrest. Kicking off the Readiness working group's efforts, the Trust invited Tim Heaphy, the author of the *Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia*,<sup>5</sup> to spur the group's thinking about how to begin broad-based planning in advance of civil unrest. Heaphy's presentation focused on what went wrong, drilling in on three themes: 1) poor communication between law enforcement and other agencies; 2) Charlottesville Police Department's misplaced confidence in its ability to adequately manage large events; and 3) a lack of trust between police and community members. Prior failures to protect public safety



“really eroded trust in law enforcement”. Ultimately Heaphy resolved that City failed to protect public safety and First Amendment rights, and that the City’s failure will have lasting effects on the fabric of the community.

Discussion following Heaphy’s presentation focused on how to plan in advance of civil unrest and the value of bringing new stakeholders into the conversation. Responding to whether a group can effectively plan in advance of civil unrest, Heaphy suggested the group must truly be diverse and include groups that are critical of the system and community leaders—if a truly diverse group can work together, perhaps they can develop trust and relationships to begin sharing information. If pre-existing relationships are in place, Heaphy indicated that advocates and organizations will be more open to dialogue with city leaders leading up to and in advance of crisis.

The Readiness working group plans to build on the momentum of Heaphy’s presentation with subsequent meetings including expanding stakeholders to include local university student leaders, as well as activists from the community. Thereafter, the Readiness working group will develop a “blueprint of suggestions and recommendations” to present to city leaders and the police chief.

## NEXT STEPS

The Trust continues to meet on a monthly basis as its work evolves. The Readiness working group is considering how to engage additional diverse stakeholders to develop a broad-based community plan in advance of civil unrest. The Future Concerns / Communication Joint working group is convening groups to identify ideas to better “institutionalize listening”. The Resilience, Youth and Education Joint working group is considering how to launch and support community resilience.

Perhaps, the Trust has enhanced collaborative communications and highlighted the need for broad-based community planning in advance of civil unrest. Yet, it is clear that the Trust’s work is just beginning.

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William “Bill” Froehlich developed this case study. Bill is the Deputy Director of the Divided Community Project and the Langdon Fellow in Dispute Resolution at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law. Bill is grateful to the members of the Columbus Community Trust for their willingness to let him observe the evolution of the project and sincerely thanks Carl Smallwood, Jocelyn Armstrong, Jill Snitcher-McQuain, Carter Stewart and Tim Heaphy for giving up their valuable time to sit for an interview about the project. Bill sincerely appreciates the support and guidance of the Divided Community Project’s steering committee, particularly Craig McEwen, Nancy Rogers, Josh Stulberg, and former project director Grande Lum. Bill can be reached at [Froehlich.28@osu.edu](mailto:Froehlich.28@osu.edu).

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## Endnotes

- 1 The Trust’s work is based in significant part on the Divided Community Project’s publication *Planning in Advance of Civil Unrest* (2016), which “distills lessons from recent experience with civil unrest that can be useful to those who want to have a plan in place before turbulence occurs.” <https://go.osu.edu/DCPpia>.
- 2 A step-by-step toolkit for initiating and implementing a broad-based community planning effort in advance of civil unrest is available at on the Divided Community Project’s website. <https://go.osu.edu/DCPpia>.
- 3 The *Midland Simulation* is available to any community or non-profit organization at no cost. For more information about the simulation, please contact DCP Deputy Director William Froehlich at [frohlich.28@osu.edu](mailto:frohlich.28@osu.edu).
- 4 DCP’s Community Preparedness and Assessment Test (CPAT) is designed to spark conversations about collaborative community planning and divisive community issues. CPAT is available to any community or non-profit organization at no cost. For more information about CPAT, please contact DCP Deputy Director William Froehlich at [frohlich.28@osu.edu](mailto:frohlich.28@osu.edu).
- 5 Tim Heaphy, FINAL REPORT: INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE 2017 PROTEST EVENTS IN CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA (November 24, 2017), <https://www.hunton.com/images/content/3/4/v2/34613/final-report-ada-compliant-ready.pdf>.

The Divided Community Project's **Community Resiliency Initiative** is a coalition of organizations and volunteers who support communities seeking to transform community division into forward-looking action. As of July 2018, the Divided Community Project anticipates publishing case studies from five partner communities: Rochester, New York; Orlando, Florida, San Mateo County, California; Columbus, Ohio; and, San Leandro, California.

For more information about the Divided Community Project, take a look at our website, <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/dividedcommunityproject>, or email Deputy Director William "Bill" Froehlich at [Froehlich.28@osu.edu](mailto:Froehlich.28@osu.edu).

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Additional publications from the Divided Community Project are available as follows:

- Facing Hate (forthcoming, 2018)
- The Midland Simulation: A Tabletop Exercise on Community Division During Civil Unrest (regularly updated), email [Froehlich.28@osu.edu](mailto:Froehlich.28@osu.edu) for more information
- Divided Communities and Social Media: Strategies for Community Leaders (2017), [go.osu.edu/DCPsm](http://go.osu.edu/DCPsm)
- Planning in Advance of Civil Unrest (2016), [go.osu.edu/DCPpia](http://go.osu.edu/DCPpia)
- Key Considerations for Community Leaders Facing Civil Unrest: Effective Problems-Solving Strategies that have been used in Other Communities (2016), [go.osu.edu/DCPk](http://go.osu.edu/DCPk)

In addition to the AAA-ICDR Foundation, The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, the JAMS Foundation, the Kettering Foundation, the Jacques M. Littlefield Foundation, Nextdoor, the Ohio State University Emeritus Academy, and the Ohio State University Democracy Studies Program also support the Divided Community Project.



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