

Responding To Racial Tension In Your Municipality

A Closer Look at the Guidance Recommended by the National League of Cities
and the US Department of Justice's Community Relations Service



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Introduction

Connecticut’s towns and cities have a key role to play in the renewed efforts across the nation to promote racial equity. Much attention has been directed toward policies and practices at the national and state levels, and rightly so. But meaningful change is within reach at the local level.

Local government and school districts typically impact daily life in multiple ways: police and fire protection, schools, parks and playgrounds and recreation, zoning, housing code enforcement, trash pick-up, street maintenance, economic/job development and more.

The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) serves as the state’s league of municipalities and is led by local chief elected officials and other local leaders from across the political spectrum, representing our towns and cities, from the smallest to the largest. CCM’s core work on behalf of municipalities involves advocating for the policy priorities of municipalities and their citizens, and supporting towns and cities as they serve their residents by providing training and technical assistance, research and best practice sharing, and pooling their buying power to negotiate more cost-effective services. In this work, CCM is dedicated to carrying out our motto: “collaborating for the common good.”

CCM is uniquely positioned to advance racial equity at the local level by virtue of a long-standing and supportive working relationship with the leaders of Connecticut’s municipalities. CCM has been working hard to advance racial equity in towns and cities across Connecticut.

One of these initiatives is CCM’s CARES in Action (Communities Advancing Racial Equity) program, which has provided a guided process to support municipal leaders working toward real progress on racial equity in their cities and towns. This has included a series of workshops, roundtables, technical assistance and sharing best practices, all designed to help municipalities implement 7 action items that can lead to more equity in their local governments. Here is a link to the CCM CARES in Action webpage: <https://www.ccm-ct.org/Resources/CCM-CARES/CCM-CARES-In-Action>



CCM CARES: In Action

Checklists for Responding to Racial Tension

One for Municipal Chief Elected Officials and one for Police Officials

As part of CCM’s CARES in Action initiative, we share innovative and impactful best practices from experts across the country on a range of key issues. In this spirit, we are sharing the advice and best practices recommended by the US Department of Justice Community Relations Services and the National League of Cities to respond to heightened racial (or other) tensions in a community.

This report includes recommendations and checklists drawn directly from two important publications on responding to racial tensions in a community:

- NLCs’ Municipal Action Guide: “Responding to Racial Tension in Your City” for Municipal Leaders
- USDOJ Community Relations Service Toolkit for Policing: “Police Critical Incident Checklist” for Police Officials

Each of these publications provides concrete, clear action steps to take in order to be prepared for potential racial tension and to act quickly when an event triggers heightened tension in your community. Each recommends strategies that include partnership and collaboration with all parts of the community and municipal government—particularly the police, and promote transparency, authenticity, consistency, and empathy.

The recommendations/checklists are presented here for all our towns and cities to consider. Additionally, CCM will hold special CARES in Action sessions that will feature presentations and discussion on both these documents.





Municipal Action Guide

Responding to Racial Tension in Your City



The full NLC report can be found at:
<https://www.nlc.org>



Racial Tension: Checklists

Crisis Response

This list provides some of the most critical steps your municipality will want to take to respond in moments of racial tension.

Convene all cabinet/executive level staff to ensure city leadership is briefed from outset.

- Elected officials, managers, department heads, and key staff must operate from the same basis of knowledge and information.

Consult with municipal legal counsel to ascertain any issues of municipal liability.

Identify options for independent investigation in consultation with legal counsel.

Establish a clear and direct line of communication with police chief.

- Ensure that all facts about the incident are accurately and collectively known in real time.
- Agree on timing of fact sharing with stakeholders and/or public.

Identify elected leadership/staff and clearly state roles for internal response team; (i.e. spokesperson, family/victim liaison, media liaison, etc.). Set the tone:

- Publicly affirm commitment to the five values (*empathy, transparency, authenticity, partnership and collaboration, and consistency*).
- Update the family/victim(s) and the public with new information as developments occur.

Articulate a balanced message to law enforcement leadership and personnel.

- Provide acknowledgement and appreciation of their work but also stress the need for thorough investigation into incident.

Prioritize outreach to family/victim(s).

- Designate family/victim(s) liaison.
- Connect family/victim(s) to appropriate services.



Engage community stakeholders.

- Identify and engage a broad and diverse array of stakeholders who can bring knowledge, skills, abilities and assets to the crisis response management and post-crisis response efforts. (see Stakeholder Checklist)
- Set up community conversations in partnership with community stakeholders to engage them in understanding and learning from the incident and to prevent future incidents.

Develop an asset map of community stakeholders. Establish direct lines of communication to:

- Family/victim(s) – Discuss appointing a liaison so family has a direct line of communication to municipal leadership. Inquire if family would like to appoint a liaison as well for channeling all communications.
- Community stakeholders – Establish a direct line of communication to the identified community stakeholders and engage them in sharing accurate updates throughout the crisis.
- Public – Establish communication platform(s) (i.e. – website, hotline) that community can access to receive information/updates.

Establish/review crowd management response policies with police chief and response team.

- Identify and review demonstration/protest policies, practices, procedures (Keep de-escalation at top of mind).
- Identify and review de-escalation protocols.

Continue to communicate updates to and any need for support from county, state, and federal officials.



Communications

This checklist provides guidance on effective communication in the event of a critical incident in your municipality. It reinforces some of the suggestions in the Crisis Response Checklist provided and should be used in tandem with it.

- Designate a primary spokesperson and a backup spokesperson.
- Understand your audience and who you are communicating with (Note: your key audience is always your constituents, even if you are on the national news).
- Gather information and be thoroughly briefed by relevant agency and community stakeholders before you make any written or verbal statements.
- Based on your audience, identify the appropriate communication methods and channels for disseminating information to this audience. Ensure that all audiences’ language needs and access needs are considered and addressed (i.e. non-English speakers; hearing impaired; digital divide; elderly; etc.).
- Establish a regular schedule of updates to manage expectations around information-sharing; communicate the schedule transparently.



Stick to the facts and acknowledge context:

- Consider details that may be relevant beyond the single incident.
- Consider differing lived experience of impacted residents/communities.
- Do not editorialize or express your personal opinion.

Do not simply say “no comment.” Provide factual responses about why you may not have an answer in the moment and be transparent to the extent legally appropriate.

Track and respond to media and community requests.

Maintain a crisis communications inventory, a running document of statements, speakers, and coverage.

Stay calm and composed even when asked tough questions.

NLC: “Responding to Racial Tension in Your City”

Stakeholder

This list provides a framework for identifying and engaging a broad and diverse array of stakeholders who can bring knowledge, skills, abilities and assets to the crisis response management and post-crisis response efforts.

Every municipality is unique, and the range of stakeholders will vary. For each category below, consider:

- 1** Who is essential to the crisis response and the subsequent coordinated action and support?
- 2** Who in your community can contribute to a better response to and outcome from the crisis?

Local government

- Municipal leadership: elected officials; appointed officials; department heads; line staff

Law enforcement

- Police chief; deputies; community liaison officers

County, state, and federal government

- County health and social services
- State legislators
- Federal law enforcement (in the event of an independent investigation)

Non-profit, community-based organizations

- Local, private organizations providing social services; youth-serving organizations; cultural organizations

Neighborhood groups

- Advisory neighborhood groups; neighborhood watch groups



Religious community

- Religious leaders; ensure multidenominational representation of all religious groups in your community

Health services/mental health services/hospitals

- Private health and mental health service providers; hospital representatives (i.e. ER, crisis response personnel)

Education community

- Primary and secondary education officials
- College, university, community college representatives

Business community

- Chamber of Commerce; major employers; business owners

National organizations

- National organizations providing support to municipalities addressing issues of racial equity

Philanthropic organizations

- Regional representatives of national philanthropic groups engaged in supporting racial equity work

About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the nation’s leading advocacy organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. Through its membership and partnerships with state municipal leagues, NLC serves as a resource and advocate for more than 19,000 cities, towns and villages and more than 218 million Americans. Learn more at www.nlc.org.

About Race, Equity And Leadership (REAL)

In the wake of the 2014 unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, NLC created REAL to strengthen local leaders’ knowledge and capacity to eliminate racial disparities, heal racial divisions and build more equitable communities. REAL does this through several intervention channels and support systems and with the understanding that local government leaders may not know where or how to start, offering tools and resources designed to help local elected leaders build safe places where people from all racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds thrive socially, economically, academically and physically.



Police Critical Incident Checklist

This section* contains a checklist to prepare police officials for responding to a critical incident that has the potential to result in controversy or conflict involving the police and a community. Because a critical incident typically requires a police department to quickly undertake a wide range of actions, straining the capacity of the department, a checklist can help to ensure that officials consider all potential options ahead of time, and that certain tasks do not “fall through the cracks” during an incident. This checklist is not meant to be a comprehensive list of steps or a rigid timeline for a police response, but rather is intended to serve as a guide to many of the issues that police should consider before, during, and after a critical incident that results in community tension.

The immediate response of a police executive can determine how the community will respond to an incident, and can set the tone for the department’s ongoing relationship with the community in the long-term. This checklist emphasizes actions that can help calm tensions and demonstrate good faith to the community.

*The Police Critical Incident Checklist is part of DOJ/CRS’s Police-Community Relations Toolkit.

The Police Critical Incident Checklist is a planning resource for police executives to prepare them for responding to a potential controversial incident. This checklist can also be used to assist police executives during an incident. This checklist is not meant to be comprehensive list of steps or a rigid timeline for responding to a critical incident, but rather acts as a flexible resource, highlighting many important steps that police executives should consider.

Items to Consider Before a Critical Incident Occurs for the Police Executive

- Discuss notification and response protocols with the mayor, city manager, and any elected/appointed boards or commissions which have police oversight. Have a plan for incidents, including an agreement on what they want to be notified about and when these notifications should occur.
 - Establish relationships and direct lines of communication with key community leaders. Have a list of these community leaders ready with cell phone numbers.
 - Establish relationships and direct lines of communication with police union leaders, if applicable. Have a list of these union leaders ready with cell phone numbers.
 - Once relationships have been established, consider forming an Advisory Board that reflects the diversity of the community. For example, the Advisory Board could include one or more representatives from each policing area (district, precinct, ward, etc.). The Advisory Board should meet regularly and can help determine the best ways to engage the community and de-escalate any tensions if an incident occurs.
 - Ensure that you have a protocol for major incidents, including a media plan, and that investigators, supervisors, and command staff members know their roles and responsibilities.
 - Top police officials should visit officer roll calls, meet with specialized department units, and establish relationships with key local news media personnel during non-crisis times. Maintain communication with them.
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Items for the Chief Executive to Consider Immediately After a Critical Incident

Immediate Action Items (within approximately 2 hours of the incident)

- Ensure that a command-level staff member is on the scene and providing information directly to you as it is received.
- Notify key public officials and community leaders about the situation promptly.
 - Let them know that you are gathering additional information and that you will contact them as soon as you know more.
- Gather as much preliminary information as possible about the incident. If possible, go to the scene of the incident yourself.
- Contact your public information or media office or liaison and develop an initial plan for their role. Start planning a press gathering to release information as quickly as possible. This planning should include the use of various media to keep the public informed. Social media, particularly Twitter, increasingly is being used by police to share information directly with the public and the news media on a minute-to-minute basis during a critical incident. Address misinformation directly. If new information contradicts earlier department reports,

USDOJ: “Police Critical Incident Checklist”

issue the correct information as soon as possible. As time allows, use translation services to address the language needs of the community’s diverse stakeholder groups.

- Avoid “dueling” press conferences; try to engage all interested parties to share podium time so that the community can see unity among their local leaders.
- If applicable, assign staff to begin watching social media and activity to assess what is being said about the incident and to gauge the mood of the community.

Action Items (within approximately 8 hours of the incident)

- Provide the preliminary information you can to the public about the incident (i.e., what you know, what you don’t know, what the department is doing about it); and if applicable, explain why you cannot provide additional information, and indicate when you will be able to share further information.
 - **Emphasize that this is preliminary information in every statement.** You are balancing the need for transparency with the reality that sometimes the first information about an incident may change as additional information emerges.¹
 - If applicable, avoid making any prejudgments about officers’ conduct before you have complete information, unless your statement is clearly needed (e.g., if a publicly available video depicts overt police misconduct or criminal behavior by an officer).
 - Explain that it may also take longer for some information to be released if there is an ongoing police investigation.
- Let the public know how often you will update them on the status of the incident or new information, and how these updates will be provided.

Action Items (within 24 hours of the incident)

- Brief community leaders and ask for their help in defusing community tensions while getting accurate information to their constituencies. Ask for calm and patience as the incident unfolds. Be flexible in briefing various community organizations and advocates; some may want to meet in groups, others may prefer to meet individually. Other leaders may have a preference for meeting in-person rather than over the phone.
- Engage public officials and community leaders to agree on a unified message that presents a transparent and cooperative process. Create a plan to work together should the incident start to escalate. While there can be disagreement or differing perceptions early on as to what has occurred, all leaders should be in agreement about the need to keep the peace; conduct a thorough and impartial investigation, if applicable; and make a commitment to keep the community informed. Craft the unified message around these statements that all local leaders can support.
- If applicable, publicly explain the investigatory process and any related policies that impact the release of information or determination of findings. Clarify policies related to contentious issues. Explaining the rationale for policies or practices that the public may not understand may be helpful in maintaining the community’s patience and deescalating tensions.

1. See, for example, St. Louis Metropolitan Police Chief Sam Dotson discussing an officer-involved shooting incident in the PERF report “Defining Moments for Police Chiefs,” pp. 7-8. <http://www.policeforum.org/assets/definingmoments.pdf> .

USDOJ: “Police Critical Incident Checklist”

- When applicable, publicly clarify departmental policies governing the status of any officers who are involved in a controversy. This may include explaining laws that protect the rights of police officers (especially any requirements that prevent their names from being released), and any other policies that help explain administrative and investigatory actions taken that may not be immediately apparent to the public.
 - If applicable, announce publicly your willingness to cooperate with investigations of your department by other agencies (local, state, or federal).
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Action Items (within 1 week of the incident)

- Consider the circumstances of the incident. If appropriate, you may choose to visit involved individuals, and to provide an update on the investigation and what to expect from the department, to extend an offer to provide updates, or make a liaison from your agency available to them. **Based on the circumstances, you may consider moving up the timeline for this call/meeting to the first 24 hours of the incident.*
 - Anticipate and take precautions to prevent new incidents or confrontations. This includes giving supervisors guidance on how they should discuss the situation with officers at roll calls, closely monitoring unusual calls or activity, obtaining information from community leaders, and watching social media activity in the community.
 - Frequently attend community events to explain the department’s handling of the incident, as well as department policies and practices.
 - Develop a strategy for releasing public information regularly, using social media, television, radio, or other forms of communication.
 - Engage with both sworn and civilian staff within the department to address any concerns resulting from the incident. Ensure that employees have access to counseling, if appropriate.
 - Issue a statement about the incident to all department employees and offer ample opportunities to discuss their concerns. Make sure this message is consistent with the message that you are delivering to the public.
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Action Items (long-term incident aftermath)

- Request the assistance of community groups or others that may be able to assist with inter-group conflict assessment and conciliation moving forward.
- Consider having an after-action review of the incident conducted by an outside review team. The after-action review should include lessons learned and should highlight promising practices. Share these findings and lessons learned department-wide. You may also consider making the findings from the after-action report public.
- Survey different community groups to learn about their concerns with the police or department operations.
- Consider opportunities for the community to provide additional input. Consider having third parties or community leaders host and facilitate the meetings.
- Consider conducting a review of any policies, accountability systems, or training protocols related to the incident.
- Consider establishing a public commission, task force, or other work group to develop recommendations for addressing specific concerns.
- Consider conducting an assessment of your department’s community policing practices.
- Remember to continually update internal stakeholders in the aftermath of the event.

CCM is the state's largest, nonpartisan organization of municipal leaders, representing towns and cities of all sizes from all corners of the state, with 169 member municipalities.

We come together for one common mission — to improve everyday life for every resident of Connecticut. We share best practices and objective research to help our local leaders govern wisely. We advocate at the state level for issues affecting local taxpayers. And we pool our buying power to negotiate more cost-effective services for our communities.

CCM is governed by a board of directors that is elected by the member municipalities. Our board represents municipalities of all sizes, leaders of different political parties, and towns/cities across the state. Our board members also serve on a variety of committees that participate in the development of CCM policy and programs.

Federal representation is provided by CCM in conjunction with the National League of Cities. CCM was founded in 1966.

