



PRESS RELEASE

Georgia Appleseed report on law enforcement-community relations and policies

Georgia Appleseed recommends policy changes to increase transparency, training and trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve

ATLANTA (Jan. 14, 2016) Georgia Appleseed Center for Law & Justice, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public interest law center with the mission to increase justice in Georgia through law and policy reform, has done a comprehensive assessment of relations between Georgia law enforcement and their communities over a ten-month period in 2015.

The local and national backdrop for the study is the recent slate of highly-publicized shootings between police and the communities they patrol. This study was motivated by a belief that all Georgians should live in communities that are safe and where people engage each other with the highest level of mutual dignity, respect and responsibility without regard to race or ethnicity.

“In the course of the study, we looked at national organizations, other task forces and best practices across the country and compared them to what is happening in Georgia,” said Sharon Hill, Georgia Appleseed’s executive director. “What we want is for Georgia to be on the vanguard of a community policing model that is based on trust, shared goals and mutual understanding.”

In the assessment, Georgia Appleseed interviewed 140 law enforcement personnel, prosecutors, defense lawyers, neighborhood associations and faith, political and nonprofit leaders across the state in interviews and meetings. The goal was to assess the nature of police-community relations in Georgia and to develop recommendations for changes to law, policies and practices that could improve or enhance them. Georgia Appleseed’s methodology was objective and data driven, informed by a deep respect for the service law enforcement personnel provide to our society and by a belief that all Georgia’s citizens must be afforded their constitutional rights. In the course of the study, Georgia Appleseed reviewed the findings of the study with the same people interviewed to make sure that the results were a good summary of the data collected.

“With this study we can give the Georgia law enforcement community, lawmakers and community members a blue print for improving police-community relations,” said Teddy Reese, Georgia Appleseed’s Director of Community Operations and Affairs. Reese also serves as the project lead. “Many of our recommendations can be implemented easily and with no cost. We’re going to be working with law enforcement agencies and lawmakers to make these changes, some as soon as possible and some over time so that Georgia will be a best-in-class state for these kinds of policies and procedures.”

Georgia Appleseed discovered that if two broad areas of concern are addressed, it could result in a decrease in the likelihood of future violent encounters between police and community members. The areas are first, updating state and local laws, and second, implementing standard operating procedures across all state and local police departments. The study goes into further detail about recommendations for the following:

- **Standard operating procedures.** The Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police and other agencies manage the voluntary Georgia Law Enforcement Certification Program, which includes a requirement for adopting and maintaining compliance with a wide range of SOPs. However, only a relatively small percentage of Georgia law enforcement agencies have sought and obtained certification. The General Assembly also should enact legislation requiring each law enforcement agency to provide public access to standard operating procedures.
- **Clarifying Use of Force Law.** Georgia Appleseed believes that each Georgia law enforcement agency should have a clearly articulated policy on the use of deadly force.

- Officer Training Curriculum Review and Revision. Georgia Appleseed found that it is critical police officers receive the necessary level of training to implement standard operating procedures.
- Expanded Collection of Detention Information. Georgia Appleseed recommends that the Criminal Justice Reform Council assess the feasibility and cost of expanding law enforcement data collection requirements to provide for a more comprehensive collection and reporting of – and public access to – data on citizen detentions.
- Reporting Incidents of Concern. State law should require that all law enforcement agencies prepare “use of force” reports on incidents of concern and that this information is compiled and reported on a state-wide basis.
- Department Demographics. The existence of a diverse police force does not guarantee positive community trust and engagement; however, a wide discrepancy between a police department’s diversity and that of the community it serves has the potential to generate mistrust. The General Assembly should enact legislation requiring that each law enforcement agency annually report and make publicly available personnel demographics (age, race/ethnicity and gender).
- Disclosure of Incident Information. Create a model policy for the certification program that outlines best practices for disclosure of critical incident information to the public as well as to the family of the deceased or injured community member. Engaging prosecutors, representatives of the media and community members in the discussion could greatly enhance such an effort.
- Independent Investigations and Charging Decisions. The General Assembly should enact legislation requiring that incidents of concern be investigated by an independent, uninvolved law enforcement entity and that charging decisions in these cases be made by an independent special district attorney.
- Peace Officer Grand Jury Participation. In Georgia, peace officers are granted special rights to participate in grand jury proceedings if charged with a crime allegedly committed in the course of duty. The officer may give sworn testimony after the prosecuting attorney has presented the state’s case and that testimony is not subject to cross examination or rebuttal. The stated rationale for this expansion of grand jury participatory rights in the 1970s was the potential for frivolous charges which could embarrass the officer and the officer’s family. Georgia Appleseed believes that, at the very least, the law should be amended to limit the time that the officer may be present in the grand jury room to testifying only and to allow the officer to be subject to cross examination and rebuttal.

The interviews and report research were done by a group of more than 180 attorneys and other professionals, working in a pro bono capacity, and specifically trained by Georgia Appleseed. Georgia Appleseed’s Director of Projects, Rob Rhodes, is the primary author of the resulting report.

Georgia Appleseed will be presenting its findings to lawmakers, agencies and community meetings over the next months. Additionally, the Atlanta Bar Association has asked Georgia Appleseed to present the report at its January 14 “Equal Justice in Law Enforcement Symposium.” Georgia Appleseed representatives are available for interviews.

To read a full copy of the report, please visit: <https://gaappleseed.org/initiatives/race-law-enforcement-and-the-law>.

About Georgia Appleseed

The Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public interest law center with the mission to increase justice in Georgia through law and policy reform. We seek a Georgia where the voices of poor people, children and marginalized people are heard and where injustices that no one should endure are resolved. Despite its small staff, Georgia Appleseed has been able to address serious issues of public concern by enlisting the volunteer services of lawyers and other professionals from around the state.

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