How Police Reform was Launched in Lansing

For more than a year, our attorneys advised community leaders in Lansing, Illinois as they negotiated a confidential agreement through the DOJ to reform police practices after a video last summer sparked public outrage.

Now, they are speaking out about what they won and the challenges ahead.

By Timna Axel
It was an overcast day on Tuesday, July 31 in the village of Lansing, Illinois.

A dozen people representing Lansing police, the mayor’s office, community leaders, and the Department of Justice all crowded into a small room inside the police department building. An hour later, they emerged with a signed document laying out 11 specific promises for reform - a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that could nonetheless transform the broken relationship between Lansing police, Village officials and community members.

“I think we could do a whole lot with this [MOU],” says Elvis Slaughter, a former deputy sheriff who led a community coalition in negotiations for more than a year. “It’s not much, but you take what you can and build on it.”

If the Lansing police and village administrators fulfill the actions of the MOU, it would mean recruiting a more diverse cohort of police officers; working with high school youth on joint know-your-rights programming and dialogue; and developing a community-based Restorative Practices Program for first time youth offenders.

“This is an opportunity to make progress, but without accountability structures to monitor that, there’s a real possibility that things could fall to the side,” warns Aneel Chablani. As the Advocacy Director for Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights, Chablani advised the community coalition and provided legal support throughout negotiations.

Until recently, this sleepy south Chicago suburb of 28,000 people was unknown outside Illinois. But last June, Lansing burst onto the national scene when a video surfaced showing an off-duty police officer pinning down a Black teenager in the officer’s front yard and threatening to kill him. Village officials worried that Ferguson-inspired protests could disrupt their community; many local residents feared racism and misconduct in the police force.

Pastor Dan Roels of New Hope Church says that structural racism has long been a problem in Lansing, which has seen a rapid demographic change in recent years as communities of color have grown.
“I recall a sermon back in 2016 where I told my congregation that there was no reason something like [Ferguson] couldn’t happen in our little south suburb,” he remembers. “It felt all too familiar given the context of national events over the last few years.”

Michelle Ford, a Chicago transplant who moved to Lansing nearly two decades ago, was hosting her 18-year-old nephew for the summer when the video surfaced.

“When this thing happened last year, I thought about him and it kind of just brought everything closer to home,” recalls Ford. “I’ve always been interested in civil and social justice, and then this thing happened in my backyard.”

She began meeting regularly with a group of concerned residents in coffee shops and at each other’s homes. They saw police misconduct as only part of the problem. In a town where police officers and government officials were overwhelmingly White, community members wanted more transparency and greater civic literacy. They felt that the video could provide an opening to press for change.
Elvis Slaughter was also alarmed.

As a veteran of the NAACP in Hammond, Indiana, he was part of successful efforts led by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to negotiate for an agreement between community leaders and police. When he moved to Lansing and joined the volunteer police commission in 2014, Slaughter noted that there were only two Black officers on the force. He also faced racist incidents when he ran for village trustee. So when the video came out last summer, he embraced the chance to involve the DOJ in local efforts for reform.

Slaughter gathered a group of community leaders and clergy together, including Pastor Dan Roels and Michelle Ford, and along with the NAACP Chicago Far-South Suburban Branch they began meeting with a DOJ mediator in order to press their demands for reform. He also called Chicago Lawyers’ Committee to ask for legal assistance in their negotiations.

"We really championed community lawyering throughout this process," reflects Brittney Watkins, a legal intern with Chicago Lawyers’ Committee who grew up near Ferguson, Missouri. In practice, that meant advising the community on objective measures to reach their goals, rather than suggesting what those goals should be.

“It’s about making sure that they can live with the outcomes, because at the end of the day, they’re the ones who have to live with it,” she explains.

In August, Lansing officials held a town hall meeting to facilitate community dialogue around the incident. Over a hundred residents packed the auditorium of a local high school. According to some community leaders, the event was not well publicized and only a small percentage of attendees were people of color. Still, the forum generated more than twenty ideas and recommendations to improve police-community relations.

“I found it very positive, but one deficit was that the Village appeared to have a real problem with the controversy, not with the racially charged incident that should never have happened,” remembers Pastor Roels.

“I’m not sure that the Village really understood the national nerve that was touched when that happened.”

As confidential mediation sessions unfolded over the course of ten months,
community leaders would present their concerns, ask questions, and discuss their terms with the DOJ mediator and Lansing officials. Many were pleasantly surprised by Police Chief Dan Murrin, who seemed to welcome the dialogue and some of the proposed changes. Yet many of the concerns from the community forum were not reflected in the final MOU - issues like de-escalation and mental health training for police, transparency and disclosure reforms, and diversity in government. Some community members quit the mediations, and others felt that in the Village was getting more concessions than residents.

Still, there was hope in the air when the group crowded together to sign the final MOU this July.

“I think the MOU has some very small positive steps toward building racial understanding in Lansing,” says Pastor Roel. “They are positive steps, but they’re small.”

Elvis Slaughter plans to continue meeting with the community coalition and setting goals that will address diversity and racial equity across Lansing’s
administration, and he plans to monitor the MOU closely.

“Having an attorney there listening made a big difference,” says Slaughter. “I don’t think we would have an agreement if it were not for [Chicago Lawyers’ Committee].”

Chablani points out that the MOU is not the only benchmark of progress. The agreement establishes an infrastructure for an ongoing relationship between community activists and Village officials. It will be up to both parties to explore its potential, and to use the agreement to broaden the conversation.

For Michelle Ford, the MOU process is only the beginning of a larger movement for transparency and civic engagement in Lansing. “If I can, I’ll definitely be helping register folks to vote - especially young people,” she says.

“You have to take a stand and keep going until you can’t.”

Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights is a group of civil rights lawyers and advocates working to secure racial equity and economic opportunity for all. We provide legal representation through partnerships with the private bar, and we collaborate with grassroots organizations and other advocacy groups to implement community-based solutions that advance civil rights.