

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES PROJECT: ALLEVIATING TENSIONS, STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS, AND MAKING SILICON VALLEY SAFER

*The Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center (PCRC)**

Silicon Valley is one of the most unique, diverse, exciting, and enlivening regions on earth, with seemingly abundant opportunities for achieving a high quality of life. Despite these unique characteristics, there are stark social and economic divides within Silicon Valley that sometimes lead to interpersonal misunderstandings and feelings of disconnectedness and disenfranchisement.

Many recent events across our nation involving racial tensions between communities of color and law enforcement and associated uncivil discourse appear to be amplifying ideological and political differences, making this an uneasy time in our community and nation. Silicon Valley has been extremely fortunate to avoid such extreme incidents, yet it is not immune.

Beginning in late 2016, the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center (PCRC) noticed a growing demand for its expertise in dialogue and deliberation, relationship building, and bridging diverse perspectives. Community members and organizations in Silicon Valley were seeking solutions which addressed community tension and strengthened cross-community relationships.

To attempt to address these needs, PCRC launched the “Strengthening Communities Project” (SCP) in 2016 in order to (1) improve relationships among the various components of the community; (2) build trust between community residents and law enforcement institutions; and (3) reduce violence among youth. First, SCP worked to broaden participation of faith and community leaders by training and coaching Ambassadors who reflect the diversity of San Mateo county to implement components of the project work through PCRC’s Community

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Leadership Training Series. Second, through SCP, community partners worked collaboratively to convene facilitated community engagement public forums and sessions. Both elements culminated with PCRC's *Action Summit*, held on January 11 and 12, 2018, designed to bring together a broad spectrum of participants to identify and share their best thinking about how to address some of the region's most pressing social issues while creating an opportunity for attendees to work towards action (both individually and collectively).

This case study tracks the evolution of PCRC's Strengthening Communities Project as it convenes, evolves, and pursues its articulated goals.

I. ASSEMBLE A PLANNING GROUP

In late 2016 families called PCRC about how to have constructive conversations around the holiday dinner table; schools called PCRC asking for support to address student concerns; local Silicon Valley communities noticed increased community participation and tension at local public meetings; calls for traditional mediation services increased; the national political climate was tense; tension between police and communities across the country was regularly at the forefront of national news. PCRC's demand for services was increasing.

In order to engage community stakeholders in the project and give community stakeholders "ownership" of SCP, PCRC convened stakeholder and youth advisor committees. The stakeholder advisor committee began meeting on a monthly basis beginning in 2016, and included stakeholders from a local newspaper, community college and local university representatives, law enforcement representatives, a county supervisor, local city managers, non-profit executive directors (from organizations serving pacific islanders, African Americans, and youth), K-12 educational organizations, faith leaders, county employees, and PCRC staff.

Response was overwhelming to PCRC's initial stakeholder advisory committee invitation. According to PCRC Executive Director Michelle Vilchez, "People felt like they wanted to be a part of something that was action-oriented Wanted to be a part of something bigger than themselves." One PCRC staff member observed, participants "knew why they were there, but they didn't know what they would contribute. They knew the meeting was around civil unrest and how it plays out

in our community.” As they engaged in dialogue and brainstormed, stakeholders became more comfortable.

Participants at early advisory committee meetings addressed community divisions ranging from racial tension, police-community relationships, affordable housing concerns, and youth needs. Participants suggested that the *Action Summit* should be a safe space for residents and stakeholders to have difficult conversations, and a space for inclusive and authentic engagement. One participant suggested the *Action Summit* presents an opportunity to model constructive conversation – for participants to take skills back to their communities.

PCRC initially planned to host its *Action Summit* in June 2017 – about six months after convening the stakeholder advisor committee. Stakeholders pushed back, suggesting that the *Action Summit’s* objectives should be heightened in order to give more time for collaboration and feedback on the format, and to develop a more intentional event.

The advisory committee developed consensus that youth should be engaged in the *Action Summit*. Advisory committee members suggested holding a youth panel and inviting youth to attend the summit with community stakeholders. According to Vilchez, the “youth said no. We are not ready to be with adults. We have huge challenges with connecting with each other, in being in relationships with each other because of race, economic and other issues.”

The SCP’s youth advisory committee commenced in October 2017, primarily to plan the youth role at the *Action Summit*. PCRC leveraged its connections with its local educational (K-12 and college), youth advocacy nonprofit, and youth oriented social services partners, as well as current and former PCRC youth volunteers, to populate a 15- to 20-person youth advisory committee. Thomasina Russaw, PCRC’s Director of initiatives for children youth and families, facilitated youth advisory committee conversations.

Initial youth advisory committee conversations focused on the issues they face in the community, how they would like to see change in the community, and who youth could effectively partner with to advocate for youth concerns. The advisory committee met on a regular basis prior to the *Action Summit* to plan a youth day, working with PCRC staff to design youth day events, draft questions for facilitated conversations, and begin recruiting for the event. According to Russaw, youth admit that social media is a significant influence in their lives. Youth planning

the *Action Summit* admitted that they “delve into trivial issues” on social media, but they don’t “talk about *this* stuff.” Nonetheless, youth agreed they would use their social media leverage to recruit peers to the *Action Summit*.

II. FORUMS AND ASSESSMENT, CULMINATING WITH THE *ACTION SUMMIT*

Designed by the youth and community partner advisory committees, on January 12 and 13, 2018, PCRC hosted a two-day *Action Summit* designed to strengthen relationships and transform divisions into community building action. With these goals in mind, PCRC made the theme of the Action Summit “Inspire. Design. Change.” On January 12, 2018, more than 100 community partners and county residents convened at San Mateo College; on January 13, 2018, youth converged in the same space.

The community partner day was framed by a presentation on developing safe, inclusive communities in the face of hate, from Not In Our Town Executive Producer Patrice O’Neill.¹ According to Vilchez, O’Neill was overwhelmed to see so many caring adults who were ready and willing to take action to address the division and barriers to each of us understanding each other’s stories - building relationships to end hate.

PCRC facilitated dozens of small group dialogues in the morning and afternoon sessions of the Community Partner day. In the morning, facilitators prompted participants to react to Patrice O’Neill’s presentation, share personal experiences about division and polarization, and discuss civil unrest and civil discourse in San Mateo County. Facilitators assisted each group in identifying themes from their respective conversations – dominant themes would inform conversations in the afternoon session.

A panel presentation kicked-off the afternoon discussion focusing on innovative strategies for addressing community division and polarization:

- Mountain View Police Department Captain Chris Hsiung discussed innovative technology-based strategies for connecting communities and law enforcement officials.

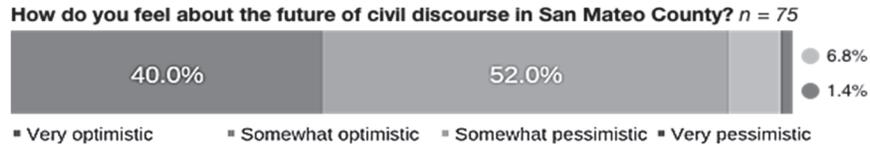
¹ “Not in Our Town is a movement to stop hate, address bullying, and build safe, inclusive communities for all,” www.niot.org.

- San Mateo Pride Center Director Lisa Putkey discussed creative solutions for developing inclusive LGBTQ+ services.
- Sanford Florida's Andrew Thomas discussed ideas for community collaboration, grounded in his experience after the Trayvon Martin tragedy.
- Saeed Mirfattah identified ideas for addressing divisive issues based on his work with the Israel-Palestine conflict.
- Divided Community Project Associate Director William Froehlich discussed how other Divided Community Project-affiliated initiatives are working to enhance community trust and resilience.

Taking inspiration from the panel, participants returned to small groups to focus on developing collaborative solutions aimed at addressing division and polarization identified in the morning session. Each small group identified and reported one strategic solution. PCRC's January 2018 *Action Summit* Executive Summary identifies the following ideas stemming from the *Action Summit*:

- A need to create safe spaces for people to share their experiences.
- Building capacity in people to dialogue as a tool for understanding.
- Finding ways to use technology as a tool to bring people together and not as a tool to
- divide them.
- Diversifying leadership, to reflect the experiences of the communities they serve.
- Using faith-based organizations as a place to create conversation circles.
- Collecting stories from the community, to be shared with established groups, like PTA.
- Finding ways to bring both sides of the conversation to the table.
- Helping law enforcement understand the community's perceptions.
- Using education as an equalizer to promote social stability.

Throughout the *Action Summit* PCRC engaged participants using a text-based platform, My90.² At the outset of the summit participants were asked about the future of Civil Discourse in San Mateo County with the following results:



The *Action Summit's* second day was youth-led and youth-focused. Describing the rationale for hosting youth separate from community partners, Vilchez described youth concerns that “adults are not giving us a role model right now. You [adults] have not been helpful. Let us [youth] have at it for a moment.” Russaw explained PCRC was “intentional about youth having a strong presence in facilitating table discussions . . . Adults did the MCing, but that was it.” She explained youth were energized and engaged, perhaps because they designed the program to address their needs. Former NFL star Wade Davis keynoted the youth day describing his experience. According to Vilchez, Mr. Davis encouraged youth to “be themselves,” to be that voice on their school campus, and in their neighborhoods.

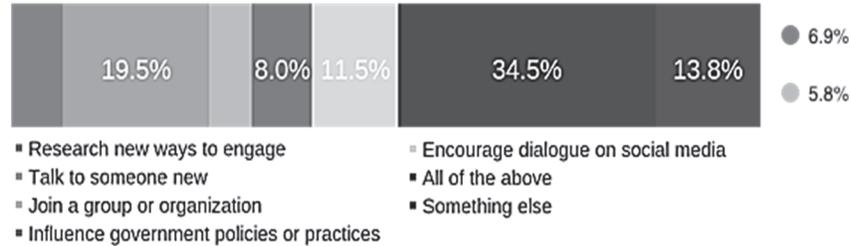
As a result of the youth day, many youths want to learn how to facilitate difficult conversations so they can take facilitation skills back to their immediate environments. After observing the youth day Andrew Thomas remarked that youth have more challenges than he previously assumed. He further appreciated how youth at the *Action Summit* considered how to be more accepting of their peers without judgement and how to reduce prejudice in their own communities. Inspired by the *Action Summit's* second day, Thomas is now making efforts to authentically engage youth in community outreach efforts in his community, Sanford, Florida.

III. NEXT STEPS

At the conclusion of the *Action Summit*, PCRC called participants to action, asking them to commit to take specific action. Participants committed to the following action at the conclusion of the summit:

² My90 is a secure, data-drive platform that helps law enforcement agencies measure and improve community engagement, trust, and relationships, www.textmy90.com.

After today's summit, what is the primary action you will take in your community?
n = 87



PCRC is following up with *Action Summit* participants to share resources for taking action.

To facilitate further engagement, PCRC has connected *Action Summit* participants with local non-profit Thrive (the alliance of nonprofits for San Mateo County), whose aim is to support and promote a nonprofit sector that is a major contributor to the economic and social health of San Mateo County.³ According to Vilchez, PCRC connected participants to Thrive Alliance for Nonprofits “so they can more tangibly and strategically engage on issues they were passionate about. We did not want to reinvent the wheel.”

After debriefing the *Action Summit* with staff and the advisory committees, the advisory committees elected to disband. Yet, the Strengthening Communities Project continues. PCRC is working with a local public access radio station to develop a series of six community forums. PCRC continues youth leadership training—specifically facilitation training—in collaboration with the local Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, Big Brothers / Big Sisters, and other youth-facing organizations.

Moving forward, PCRC intends to develop dialogue between youth and law enforcement and to develop intentional partnerships with local colleges and universities.

In addition to PCRC’s *Action Summit*, PCRC hosted a series of SCP-connected trainings and forums across San Mateo County. PCRC worked to increase community capacity through a series of trainings on communication, conflict resolution, meeting management, creating change in the community, restorative justice, and the value of

³ Thrive is an alliance of more than 230 San Mateo County nonprofits, <https://www.thrivealliance.org/>.

volunteerism and community engagement. PCRC facilitated a year-long series of dialogues to give stakeholders the space to identify and address issues that are leading to divisions and polarization in San Mateo County. Partnering with public libraries, local high schools, college communities, pacific islander organizations, faith leaders, police organizations and others, PCRC hosted approximately 60 community forums. PCRC's collaboration with the local library system is highlighted.

In collaboration with PCRC, in 2017 and 2018, the San Mateo County Public Library hosted a series of 24 dialogues designed as an opportunity for residents to talk about difficult issues and bring community members to the library – an institution where ideas and knowledge can be shared. Describing an October 2017 forum focused on the Constitution, Scott Castillo, PCRC's Manager of Engaging Communities Initiative, explained "people tend to tie the topic to . . . how it impacts them." The October conversation took place the week following the tragic shooting in Las Vegas. Although the presentation did not discuss the Second Amendment, gun control was the focal point of the conversation. Castillo views the library conversations as an opportunity for residents to share and connect a topic to their lives.