

Forum focuses on rise in hate crimes in Anne Arundel County



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Anne Arundel County Executive Steuart Pittman on Feb. 26, 2020, held a forum that focused on an increase in hate and bias crimes in the county. (Washington Blade photo by Philip Van Slooten)

Anne Arundel County Executive Steuart Pittman on Feb. 26 held a forum with local and state government officials and community leaders to address an increase in hate crimes and bias incidents.

According to a Maryland State Police report; most incidents were motivated by race, ethnicity or ancestry. The number of reports based on gender identity and sexual orientation have generally increased as well, and most panelists mentioned a concern for the county's LGBTQ residents, in addition to those of other protected classes.

"I didn't want just another town hall," Pittman told a packed audience in the Anne Arundel Community College theater, stating this event was part of a 10-point plan to address the problem.

After an initial private meeting with high school students who were primarily from Chesapeake High School in Pasadena, one of the cities located in an area reporting the highest number of incidents, Pittman told crowd, "I'm inspired. I'm ready to listen and learn."

The 2018 report showed Anne Arundel led the state with 78 hate and bias incident reports, a 24 percent increase over 2017 and a 95 percent increase since 2009, the first year mentioned in the report.

The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which added sexual orientation and gender identity to the federal hate crimes law, was signed in 2009.

"It's a big deal," emphasized Anne Arundel County Police Chief Timothy Altomare, "And we will continue to make it a big deal ... We have to send a message that this is not who we are."

Most incidents were reported in academic institutions "including elementary/secondary through college/university," accounting for just over a third of all reports.

"There is no question we have a problem in our schools," Anne Arundel County Schools Superintendent George Arlotto told the audience of mostly parents and students. "We are a microcosm of our society, [but] the events in our schools have to stop."

Pittman and the others briefly mentioned a 2019 incident of a racist insult used at a high school football game. State Sen. Sarah Elfreth (D-Annapolis) also spoke of a bill that would amend Maryland's statewide hate crimes law to allow crimes "motivated either in whole or in part by" hate or bias to be prosecuted as hate crimes.

Sean Urbanski was recently convicted of the first-degree murder of 2nd Lt. Richard Collins, III, at a College Park bus stop in 2017, but prosecutors failed to secure a hate crime conviction.

Annapolis Pride Executive Board Chair and founder Jeremy Browning and Nantucket Elementary School Assistant Principal Megan Edwards, who is a PFLAG representative, spoke on behalf of the LGBTQ community. Browning told the audience about an assault he suffered while at the University of Maryland.

Browning told the Washington Blade the perpetrator's lawyer mentioned homosexuality was a factor in the assault, but he was ultimately "convicted of assault but not a hate crime." Browning also noted black transgender women continue to be victims of a national epidemic of hate violence, and mentioned last year's murders of Zoe Spears, Ashanti Carmon and Bailey Reeves.

Browning added Reeves was just 17 when she was killed last September in Baltimore.

Elfreth said she was confident the bill to update Maryland's hate crimes law has enough votes to override an unlikely veto by Republican Gov. Larry Hogan to become law.

"This is the most diverse General Assembly in Maryland history," she told the audience, adding the current slate of bills, which includes several pro-LGBTQ measures, is a product of that diversity.

Altomare and Arlotto were actively recruiting members of the audience to help increase the diversity of their workforces

However, despite assurances by panelists that current government employees continue to receive mandatory diversity training as an institutional effort to alleviate the problem, they also stated home environments were a factor to be considered as well.

This didn't sit well with Jennifer Haber, a parent and lawyer who lives in Severna Park.

"We hear the community has a responsibility to teach our children, and of course we do," Haber told both the panel and later the Blade. "But our schools have an opportunity — all of that can start in elementary school and it has to."

Kristen Cominiti, a parent from Crofton, also told both the panel and the Blade schools should offer more to ensure young children "have the hope [necessary] to make change in the world."

Other parents, both on the community panel and in the audience, called on schools to improve the county's history curriculum to ensure it is both accurate and inclusive.