

'This is just the beginning': Anne Arundel leaders hold first forum on hate crimes and bias incidents



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Conversations about pervasive discrimination, resilience and hope for change were on display Wednesday night at Anne Arundel Community College, as county officials and community leaders hosted the first forum on bias and hate crimes.

Vocal community members packed the Pascal Center for the event, which was a direct response to a recently released Maryland State Police report that showed bias incidents and hate crimes rising in Anne Arundel County. In 2018, there were 78 incidents — the most in the state, according to the report. [Nearly 70% of hate crimes and bias incidents were motivated by race, ethnicity or ancestry.](#)

County Executive Steuart Pittman said the report served as a wakeup call. It was time to take action.

The event provided a platform for community-wide discourse — panels featured community leaders including Anne Arundel County Police Chief Timothy Altomare, Anne Arundel County Public Schools Superintendent George Arlotto, State Sen. Sarah Elfreth, D-Annapolis, and Chief Counsel for Civil Rights in Maryland's Office of the Attorney General Zenita Wickham Hurley, among others.

Pittman opened the discussion with a reflection on the history of the United States, which he said was “built on a system of racial terror.” He warned the discussion could be troubling and could reopen old wounds. He and Georgia Noone-Sherrod, executive director of Anne Arundel County's Conflict Resolution Center, emphasized that “this is just the beginning.”

“Today, America is divided,” Pittman said. “White nationalism and the activities of white supremacist groups are on the rise. Some people are clinging to hate and racism as though those are the things that made America great. They are not. Those are the things that weakened us.”

The discussion was moderated by Alvin Gillard, executive director of the Maryland Commission for Civil Rights. He noted the lack of diversity on the night's first panel, which was made up of county leaders — five of the six speakers were white. The leaders spoke about recent successful efforts to diversify but agreed that there is room to improve across many of the county departments.

Annapolis attorney and immigrant rights advocate Roberto Veloso spoke about his experience as a Cuban immigrant, and the need to eradicate discrimination towards Latino immigrant communities.

He also spoke about the pervasive distrust of police within Latino communities because of documentation status.

“This reluctance is not unreasonable when you consider that anytime we complain about being victimized or being mistreated because of being Hispanic, we run the risk of someone calling immigration authorities and being detained, regardless of our legal status.”

Jeremy Browning, head of Annapolis Pride, and Megan Edwards, an LGBTQ+ advocate, spoke about the need to support queer youth. Browning described his experience at Anne Arundel County Public Schools as “terror” and emphasized the need for Gay-Straight Alliances in schools as a resource for support and community.

Meade High School junior Drake Smith, president of the Anne Arundel County NAACP Youth and College Division, worried that panelists were “preaching to the choir” because everyone in the room is aware of racism and discrimination problems.

He called it foolish for anyone to not acknowledge these issues, but encouraged the entire audience to make it their mission to educate another person.

Seventeen year old Smith's presence was emblematic of one of the main themes of the evening: a focus on bettering the county's youth.

Many of the 78 incidents in 2018 took place in schools — there were two nooses found in two months at county middle schools last winter, and administrators found the words "kill all blacks" written on a counseling sign-in sheet at another school.

Those trends continued throughout 2019 and into 2020. Less than a week before the community gathered for the forum, a student at Southern Middle School crafted a pulley that resembled a noose and hung it from the ceiling during class, according to a letter sent home to parents.

"Our investigation showed that the student involved made an offhand comment about having created a noose to others in the class," Southern Middle School principal Kevin Buckley wrote in the letter to parents. "While the intent may not have been to do so, the creation of a device that resembles a clear symbol of hate and bigotry is not something that can be tolerated in our school or our school system."

At the meeting, Arlotto urged the community to focus its efforts on the county's next generation.

"We have to spend more time listening to our students. They have an incredible amount to share and there's so much we can learn from them," Arlotto said. "Our children are (also) watching and listening to us. We have to be the models."