

CHARLESTON, SC

Mayor John Tecklenburg

CHARLESTON ILLUMINATION PROJECT

In 2015, events both local and national highlighted the eroded relationships between police departments and the communities they serve. The City of Charleston was given a unique opportunity that year to build upon the goodwill and unity displayed in the wake of the shocking and deadly shooting of nine African Americans by a white supremacist during a bible study session at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The Illumination Project, designed to lessen the likelihood of damaging reactions between police and the community they serve during stressful situations, was born just weeks later.

The project was conceptualized by former Charleston Police Chief Greg Mullen; Founding Project Leader Margaret Seidler led the project's initial work. Former Mayor Joe Riley and the City Council endorsed, supported and authorized the project, and provided its funding. The business community, along with community leaders and citizens, embraced the project through generous contributions and time devoted to making its goals and objectives a reality. Today, the vision of the project is sustained by Police Chief Luther T. Reynolds, and work continues under the leadership of the current Project Leader, Reverend Dr. Kylon Jerome Middleton. Mayor John Tecklenburg and the City Council continue their support and funding, and the commitment of business and community leaders continues.

The mission of the Illumination Project is to further strengthen citizen-police relationships that are grounded in trust and legitimacy. Legitimacy speaks to a core element of the citizen-police relationship – police exercising their authority appropriately and citizens believing they are being treated fairly. The outcomes sought are to:

- Enhance community-police relationships throughout the community and across the entire Charleston Police organization;
- Give voice to all segments of the community in a way that promotes calm and measured exploration of issues and ideas;
- Agree upon changes that preserve societal values of both public safety and individual rights;
- Increase the capacity of community and police to have civil, meaningful dialogue when addressing difficult issues;
- Celebrate and nurture those aspects of the police-community relations that are working well; and
- Develop specific, concrete, implementable plans that are measured for success.

In the aftermath of the most horrific tragedy the City had ever experienced, the Illumination Project provided an avenue for Charlestonians to do something positive and to move forward together. Before going public, training was provided to the most diverse group of community influencers ever assembled in Charleston – 99 of them. Their charge was to encourage and guide community engagement so a Strategic Plan could be developed; this was accomplished by engaging police and citizens in “Listening Sessions.” From these facilitated sessions, a Strategic Plan with five goals was developed, each with objectives, strategies and measures of success.

- Goal: Develop better understanding between police and the community. Objective: Police contribute to creation of diverse partnerships to enhance community safety.
- Goal: Build mutually respectful, trusting relationships between citizens and police. Objective: Citizens take a leadership role in creating a safe community.

- Goal: Train police and citizens to understand each other's roles and responsibilities. Objective: Police apply current research and citizen feedback to police training, new equipment, and policy and procedures to minimize negative citizen-police encounters.
- Goal: Develop Police Department policies and procedures to improve relationships. Objective: Police provide opportunities for citizen access and understanding of police policies and procedures.
- Goal: Expand the concept of community-oriented policing in all segments of the community. Objective: Police expand opportunities for joint problem solving/pro-active engagement.

The first year of the project produced 34 public listening sessions, engaging more than 850 citizens in the development of 86 strategies, most of which are now fully implemented. In years two and three, the project's focus was expanded, using Charleston's history in discussing complicated issues of race. To date, 59 public listening sessions, engaging more than 2,300 citizens, have been conducted.

To maintain the annual budget for the project, nearly \$200,000, ongoing fundraising efforts engage business leaders and the community; The City includes a \$25,000 line item for the project in the annual budget of the Police Department.

Problems encountered during the project included encouraging participation in listening sessions, identifying community generated resources, and funding. Gaining trust and legitimacy were challenges, as the communities that needed the police the most were the ones that trusted the police the least. Vulnerable communities, mostly minority, were skeptical and cautious, but building bridges of trust among leaders in the minority community, including the NAACP, faith and other civic leaders, allowed their voices to be heard. Today, Charleston officials report, the project continues to have a positive, sustained effect on the community, with the Mayor and Chief of Police often relying on Illumination Project processes to shed light on issues creating tensions among people and systems in the City. They also report that the City has partnered with the National Law Enforcement Museum in Washington, D.C. "to bring this process to the nation."

A complete report on the Illumination Project is at [Illumination Project Complete Report](#).

Additional information is available from the Reverend Dr. Kylon Jerome Middleton, Illumination Project Leader, at kjmiddleton2013@gmail.com, or 843-325-4577.