



# ***Executive Session Papers***

## **Human Rights Commissions and Criminal Justice**

**Marea L. Beeman, Series Editor**

### **Building Trust After a Police Shooting: Community Intervention Teams in Columbus, Ohio**

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Executive Session on Human Rights Commissions and Criminal Justice  
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About once a day, somewhere in the United States, police officers shoot and kill someone. Each of those killings is potentially explosive. When the victim of one of those police shootings has not hurt anyone, everyone feels the tragedy. When the victim is also a member of a racial, ethnic, or religious community that already feels itself discriminated against, the tragedy can provoke righteous anger, political protest, civil disorder, and sometimes even more violence. The individual death becomes a symbol for the larger community: a symbol of countless less serious misunderstandings, of open hostility, and fundamental rights disrespected.

The killing in December 2005 of Nasir Abdi, a young man suffering from mental illness, was such a tragedy, and it provoked the Somali community of Columbus, Ohio, to angry protest. But the killing also became the test-bed for a new, constructive response to such killings, organized by the official human rights commission in Columbus—an entity known as the Columbus Community Relations Commission. Previous police shootings had alerted the Commission to the need to be ready in a moment of crisis to respond constructively to such a shooting,

and the Commission's director had designed a response known as a Community Intervention Team (CIT). Nasir Abdi's death became the occasion for the first mobilization of a CIT.

Six months after the killing, five law enforcement officials and nine representatives from Columbus' Somali community met to sign the first ever CIT agreement. The agreement specifies 17 actions that the Somali community and the police will take in order to relieve the anti-police feelings that erupted in the aftermath of the shooting. The Commission will monitor the participants' compliance with the CIT agreement.

This case study describes the design of the Community Intervention Team and its implementation in the wake of Nasir Abdi's death. The study also focuses on the role of the Commission in guiding the CIT towards its successful agreement. The lessons here may help human rights commissions in other cities and states develop similar responses, tailored to their own communities, when police killings become crucibles for longstanding grievances about the neglect of fundamental rights, misunderstanding, and disrespect.

## **Text of the CIT AGREEMENT**

signed May 16, 2006, Columbus, Ohio

The Somali Community and the Law Enforcement Community agree to execute the following directives.

The Somali Community Agrees to:

- Create a contact list of the Somali community for crisis situations
- Somali professionals provide cultural sensitivity training to law enforcement regarding the Somali community
- Translate Law Enforcement informational material into Somali
- Have group meetings with selected Law Enforcement officers
- Set up meetings with newly immigrated persons for law enforcement to assist with information
- Participate in the ride-along program
- Form a permanent council
- Provide informational box of police procedures and information at Somali Community Center
- Partner with police on a "Training Video" for Somali Community
- Request the Somali community to assist Somali Youth involvement with the Police Youth Explorers program

Law Enforcement Agrees to:

- Establish Advisory committee to police for Somali Community
- Address the need for hiring a Somali speaking officers and Liaisons to the community
- To participate in cultural diversity classes
- To educate immigrants in laws and safety procedures and how police officers perform their duties
- To establish a crisis communication line for the Somali council
- Meet Quarterly to discuss issues related to safety and security
- Continue training for officers dealing with mentally handicapped individuals

### ***The Death of Nasir Abdi and an Aggrieved Community***

On December 28, 2005, four sheriff's deputies from Ohio's Franklin County entered Cassady Village Apartments on the northeast side of Columbus. They came with a court order to bring 23-year-old Nasir Abdi, a mentally ill Somali resident, to a psychiatric center where he could receive medical treatment. When the deputies appeared, Abdi, according to an account of events released by the sheriff's office,

lunged at the deputies with a kitchen knife bearing a 6-inch blade. In response, one of the officers present, Deputy Jason Evans, drew his gun and fatally shot the young man.

News of Abdi's death circulated quickly through Columbus' tight-knit Somali community. The shooting incensed many Somalis living in Columbus, who pointed to the incident as just another instance of police misconduct towards members of their community. Just two days after the shooting,

hundreds of the city's thirty thousand Somali men, women, and children gathered in front of City Hall and Central Police Headquarters to protest the shooting. Many participated in the protest after hearing accounts by witnesses living in Abdi's apartment complex who claimed that Abdi did not have a knife during his confrontation with the police. Others attended because they believed that—regardless of the details—the sheriff's deputies should have used non-lethal means to handle the situation.

In addition to the protests, community members tried to enlist the help of the Columbus chapter of the NAACP; the family of Nasir Abdi began civil litigation against the county; and, perhaps most important, community leaders agreed to a request from the Columbus Community Relations Commission to participate in its first Community Intervention Team.

***Community Intervention Teams:  
A Flexible, Credible Response to  
Community Crisis***

The idea for the CIT had its origins two years earlier, when Columbus police and local residents clashed at a crime scene in the predominantly African-American neighborhood of South Linden. Different versions of what had actually happened at the crime scene spread quickly through the South Linden community, with some residents claiming the police had used excessive force in dealing with those present. At the request of some South Linden residents, the Commission had convened a small group of leaders and neighborhood residents to engage with police officials in a series of meetings where they could express the concerns of their community, listen to the police explanations for the actions taken during the incident, and

## **The Columbus Community Relations Commission**

Almost all states and more than 70 cities across the United States have some kind of official human rights commission. Like the national Human Rights Commissions of Canada and Australia, these state and local commissions focus on the right of all people to be free from discrimination based on race, gender, age and other protected categories.

The state and local human rights commissions across the United States are often known as human relations commissions or, as in Columbus, community relations commissions. They are loosely connected through the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies.

Like many of its counterparts, the Columbus commission has legal authority to investigate discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, or ancestry in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodation. Along with enforcing the civil rights code of Columbus in these areas, the Columbus CRC also has some additional duties to reduce bias and prejudice between groups and heal communities that have been victimized by discrimination. Specifically, the Columbus CRC is directed to:

- Promote mutual understanding and respect among all racial, religious, nationality, cultural, and ethnic groups in Columbus and suggest ways to prevent discriminatory practices against such behavior;
- Work with community organizations to develop programs and educational campaigns devoted to the elimination of group prejudices, racial or neighborhood tensions; and
- Conduct research on the status and treatment of racial, religious and ethnic groups in Columbus.

These elements of the CRC's mission give the organization the authority as well as the flexibility to pursue creative measures that prohibit discrimination and promote equal justice. The CIT process is one of those measures.

recommend ways to improve police-community interactions.

The series of meetings was a surprising success. In the view of the Commission, the meetings “effectively addressed the concerns and lower[ed] the tensions” within the South Linden community. The Commission concluded that advance planning for such meetings to address future incidents would allow them to form quickly and benefit from a familiar format in which to engage with law enforcement and other officials.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge in designing the Community Intervention Teams is that the membership is completely unknown until the team is formed. As a result, the design remains abstract: essentially a series of steps and ground rules that will allow the community members recruited in each crisis to engage quickly and effectively with officials whom they probably distrust.

The “team” in a CIT is a small, diverse group of respected and well-known “representatives” from a community upset over an incident of possible police misconduct that has become a symbol of broader concerns. According to the Commission, a CIT is meant to:

1. Receive the concerns expressed by the community;
2. Communicate these concerns to the Department of Public Safety, the Division of Police, and other relevant law enforcement agencies;
3. Give substantive feedback to the community on the explanations,

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<sup>1</sup> “Concept Review: Community Intervention Team.” Memo written by the Columbus Community Relations Commission to describe the CIT process. August 4, 2005. 2.

positions, and responses of law enforcement; and

4. Work with the Department of Public Safety and other law enforcement agencies to ease community tensions, correct any misinformation, and resolve community concerns.<sup>2</sup>

The CIT process is designed primarily to guide the community reconciliation and healing process. It is not meant to limit the accountability of those responsible for mistreatment of community members or for institutional failures that may have allowed the mistreatment to occur. “During Columbus community forums where we initially presented and described the CIT process,” explains James Stowe, Executive Director of the Commission, “one of the main concerns was that the CIT might fail to protect or circumvent the legal rights of individuals. We told them, this has nothing to do with personal and specific actions; we just want to make sure communication stays open [between the police and aggrieved communities] and help the community move to a different place.”

Similarly, in designing the CIT process, the Commission had no intention of interfering with a victim’s ability to seek individual redress for a rights violation nor did it want to slow institutional reform that might help prevent the recurrence of these tragedies. Still, until Nasir Abdi’s death, no one could tell whether the CIT method might inadvertently limit these activities. When Abdi’s death led James Stowe to activate the CIT process for the first time, it was merely a loose mix of structure and process guidelines. It would require substantial improvisation with largely unforeseeable consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> “Concept Review: Community Intervention Team.” 4.

### *The First CIT is Formed*

The need for a CIT was clear to Stowe as anger escalated quickly in the aftermath of the Nasir Abdi shooting. “Right after the shooting,” recalls Stowe, “tensions were high and on-going. We recommended the CIT process to both sides of the conflict as a vehicle to get beyond these tensions.”

Both law enforcement officials and leaders in the Somali community were receptive. As Hawa Siad, director of the Somali Women and Children’s Alliance and a CIT participant explains, “the community is willing to work with police to improve relations.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Commission found that police from several neighboring jurisdictions were eager to participate, hopeful about strengthening their relations with their own Somali constituents. Encouraged with this response, The Commission planned to facilitate the first meeting of the CIT on January 18, 2006, less than a month after Abdi’s death.

Before the first meeting, however, members of the Somali community had to undertake the difficult task of choosing “representatives” who would participate in the CIT. According to the design of the process, the Commission—as convener of the meetings of the CIT with law enforcement—establishes the number of seats at the table for the community, but the task of selecting the participants rests with “the community.” The CIT process recognizes that communities vary widely in their cohesiveness, their structure, and their experience with government, so the process of selecting representatives will vary widely from one situation to the next. In this case,

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, Sherri. “City Panel Takes Lead in Killing of Somali Man; Private Discussion Aims to Resolve Tension.” *The Columbus Dispatch* 6 January 2006: F4.

dealing with a highly organized Somali community, the Commission “looked for the community leaders and told them about the CIT process and then asked them to choose seven to nine community representatives who could participate in the meetings and take information from the meetings back to the community,” according to Napoleon Bell, Deputy Director of the Columbus CRC.

Because Somalis living in Columbus interact in a tight-knit community with extensive and overlapping kinship, friendship, and business ties, leaving the selection of CIT participants to the Somali community was a realistic option. Even so, there were problems. In late January, after the Somali leaders had chosen representatives to participate in the CIT, the Commission received a letter from a Somali businessman claiming that the Somali organizations operating within the city “tell lies in front of the authorities and do the same among the community.” He asked that community elders be chosen to act as the sole contact for the Somali community. Bell concedes that tensions over questions of leadership and representation are likely to arise in every case. Nevertheless, he believes that choosing representatives to participate in the CIT should remain a community-led process in order to respect community ownership of the CIT.

### *Selecting Police and Other Participants*

While the Commission does not choose the community participants, it does play a role in selecting the institutional representatives who will attend the CIT meetings. “One of our biggest challenges in launching a CIT is getting people around the table who are key decision makers, [and] who can speak on behalf of their organization,” explains James Stowe. “We need people who have the

ability and authority to make, and commit to, decisions.”

The Commission invited specific representatives from the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office and from the Columbus Division of Police because both agencies were involved, to some extent, in the Abdi shooting.<sup>4</sup> Other law enforcement representatives were chosen or volunteered to participate because of the large Somali populations living within their jurisdictions.

In this particular situation, it was also important to include people who could discuss the mental health issues in the Abdi case. A representative from Netcare, the mental health agency that had requested a court order to bring Abdi to a facility for treatment, participated in the CIT meetings and offered authorities information about training to effectively handle the mentally ill.

### ***The Somali CIT Convenes***

The Somali CIT gathered for its first meeting, which was closed to the public, on the afternoon of January 18, 2005 with Stowe serving as convener and chair. After offering an overview of the CIT process, Stowe invited opening remarks from the Somali representatives. The discussion began bluntly as the first speaker explained: “We feel the [Nasir Abdi] shooting was an intentional homicide and feel the investigation of the shooting will be corrupt.”

Much of the conversation that followed in the next hour and a half centered on the mistrust and apprehension that many

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<sup>4</sup> The officer who shot Abdi was from the Franklin County Sheriff’s office, but because the shooting had occurred within city limits, the Columbus City Police investigated the incident.

Somalis in Columbus had felt towards the police even before the Abdi shooting. The discussion quickly shifted from comments reflecting community anger surrounding Abdi’s death to more general complaints regarding police discrimination against members of the Somali community. As one Somali CIT participant said, “It’s unfortunate that it takes a death to have this meeting, [when] we’ve been getting stopped by the police every day. They believe we are guilty by the way we look and by who we are.”

Law enforcement representatives did not speak at the first meeting. The entire 90 minutes was devoted to statements from the Somali CIT members. Then, at the second meeting on January 30, 2006, the law enforcement representatives responded to some of the specific grievances they had heard. For example, they reported that they had resolved an issue about ticketing at the local mosque. Police representatives also said they would train officers in their forces to use different hand gestures when signaling to Somalis, after learning that the current signals many officers use are offensive to members of this community. Officials also responded to questions about the length of the Abdi investigation, traffic stop ticketing, and cultural sensitivity training of police officers. By the end of the second meeting, law enforcement officials and Somali community members agreed that there was a lack of understanding on both sides that needed to be bridged. Both groups saw the potential to build the necessary communication through the CIT process.

### ***Moving from Reflection to Action***

The CIT process gives communities affected by crisis a formal opportunity to air their grievances to an official audience that, importantly, has the power to do something

about these concerns. By the fourth meeting of the CIT on March 16, 2006, the conversation had shifted from a discussion of the concerns of the Somali community to consideration of concrete steps that could be taken to resolve those concerns. The outcome of this and the remaining Somali CIT meetings would be focused around creating a document outlining actions that would ease community tensions and slowly establish trust between Somalis and police authorities. Stowe encouraged community members at the fourth meeting to offer their “ideas and input about what you’d like to see change and what you can stand ready to contribute.”

Somali community representatives responded to Stowe’s request by passing out a document outlining the major concerns that have been raised in Somali forums held after Abdi’s death as well as a number of recommendations that aim to “establish a viable community with authorities in order to avert further unnecessary deaths of Somali youngsters.” Among the requests in this document specifically related to law enforcement concerns were:

- To create a committee that works with law enforcement to intervene rapidly in any crisis that may arise between the Somali community and law enforcement;
- To establish a committee that will create a positive relationship between the Somali community and law enforcement in order to avoid mistrust in the future; and
- To create a committee that has an ongoing partnership with the City and Law Enforcement officials to educate the community about their rights and responsibilities.

At the heart of these requests was the Somali community’s desire to find police authorities they can trust to protect their safety as well as their rights. As Hasan Omar, one of the Somali participants in the CIT stated, “We need to know who to call and where to call [when there is a problem]...we need a specific number to call.”

At the next meeting of the CIT, held on April 5, 2006, law enforcement representatives had the opportunity to respond to the requests made by the Somali community and make recommendations of their own. Many of the suggestions made by law enforcement officials during this meeting actually built upon the proposals made by the Somali community in the last meeting. For example, the police representatives requested:

- A list of people from the Somali community who could serve as contacts during a crisis situation; and
- Somali culture training for police officers conducted by Somali Elders.

Other recommendations proposed by police representatives reflected a desire to inform Somali community members about police procedures in order to prevent future problems between the Somali community and law enforcement and perhaps also to communicate the challenges of policing to the community. Among other things, law enforcement officials suggested that the community maintain an information box of police procedures at the Somali Community Center and encourage community members to participate in police car ride-a-longs with Columbus police officers. For law enforcement representatives, this meeting was a rare opportunity not only to reduce community tensions after a high-profile police incident but also to repair the poor image of police officers that had existed in

the community long before the incident had even occurred.

### ***The Somali Police CIT Agreement***

After this meeting, the Commission drafted a formal agreement combining the actions proposed by Somali and law enforcement representatives during the last two CIT sessions. The Commission sent this draft agreement to all members of the Somali CIT for feedback and revisions. After the agreement was finalized, the CRC organized one last CIT meeting to allow Somali community and law enforcement representatives to sign the agreement.

The CIT agreement includes the specific actions that both groups will take in an effort to restore communication and trust between safety forces and Columbus Somalis. Somali representatives have agreed, among other things, to provide cultural sensitivity training to law enforcement officers and translate law enforcement materials into Somali. Safety officials that signed the document assented to establishing a crisis communication line for Somalis and continuing training for officers who deal with mentally handicapped individuals. Perhaps most importantly, both groups have agreed to meet quarterly in the future order to continue discussing issues related to safety and security in the Somali community.

Unlike other documents that have been created during this CIT process, this agreement is available to the press and members of the general public. How effectively each party carries out the obligations specified in this CIT agreement, though, even with public oversight and monitoring by the Columbus CRC, remains to be seen.

### ***Reflections About the CIT Process***

Somalis who participated in the CIT believe the intervention has already lessened much of the tension in the Somali community following Abdi's death. Omar Abdikarim, a Somali participant in the CIT, said "These conversations [with law enforcement officials] have been productive...so far, the discussions have been good and business-like." Abdikarim also appreciated the frankness of the CIT discussions, valuing the "opportunity to express truly how the community feels and share our concerns."

Law enforcement officials who attended the meetings are also pleased with the CIT intervention in this particular situation. When the CIT concept was first described to city and law enforcement officials in the summer of 2005, many feared that a CIT would evolve into a civilian review board monitoring police conduct. In this CIT, however, there was very little discussion of the specific events surrounding Abdi's death; rather, this case seemed to spur the outpouring of Somali tension and resentment towards safety forces that had existed long before the shooting. Many law enforcement officials participating in this CIT process said they valued the opportunity to hear the concerns and fears from the Somali community first-hand and engage in collaborative problem-solving with the community to begin to address some of these issues.

### ***Outcomes of the Somali CIT***

Quick changes in law enforcement policy and practices indicate that there have already been some notable outcomes of the Somali CIT. For instance, law enforcement officials have agreed to hold classes with members of the Somali community to provide information about traffic stop procedures

after many of the Somali representatives on the CIT stated that there is a community-wide perception of police profiling resulting from unfair traffic tickets.

The final, and perhaps most significant, outcomes of the Somali CIT are described in the CIT agreement outlining the concrete action steps that the Somali community and law enforcement representatives in Columbus have agreed to take in order to resolve the concerns voiced by the community throughout these meetings. The Commission will monitor the compliance of both parties to this agreement but there are no formal mechanisms in place that specify how the Commission can enforce the CIT agreement. Perhaps over time, as more CIT interventions are initiated, the Commission will determine the means of assuring compliance to the agreements that are the product of these meetings.

### ***The Future of the CIT***

Whether or not the CIT intervention in the Somali community after the death of Nasir Abdi will be considered a success ultimately depends on whether the process produces

real outcomes that the community can see. During community forums held to discuss the merits of the CIT process in August of 2005, the main concern of those who expressed reservations about adopting this strategy was that there would be no “real meat” to the process. Early outcomes of the Somali CIT as well as Somali community sentiments appear to dispel this fear, at least in this particular situation.

More will be learned about the potential advantages and disadvantages of the CIT process as the Columbus CRC applies the model to new and different situations. The organization is currently planning to facilitate a CIT intervention with the Latino community in Columbus in response to a number of police misconduct allegations brought to the agency by Latinos in recent months. Given the diversity of the Latino community in Columbus as well as the nature of the community’s concerns, the outcomes, and perhaps even the process, of a CIT intervention in the Latino community may significantly differ from those of the CIT intervention in the Somali community.

## **CIT Response to the Nasir Abdi Shooting: *A Timeline of Events***

**December 28, 2005.** Nasir Abdi, 23, is fatally shot by Franklin County Deputy Jason Evans at Cassady Village Apartments on the Northeast Side of Columbus.

**December 30, 2005.** Approximately 600 Somalis protest at Columbus City Hall two days after the shooting, outraged that non-lethal means were not used to handle the situation.

**January 5, 2005.** Members of the Columbus Community Relations Commission (CRC) meet with leaders of the Columbus Somali community. At this meeting, the CRC asks these leaders to invite 11 members of the Somali community to participate in a Community Intervention Team seeking to resolve tensions between the community and law enforcement in the wake of Abdi's death.

**January 18, 2006.** The Columbus Community Relations Commission holds its first Community Intervention Team (CIT) meeting between police authorities and leaders of the Somali community living in Columbus. At this meeting, Somalis air grievances about the shooting as well as other police interactions with their community.

**January 30, 2005.** At this second CIT meeting, discussion of the particular events in the Abdi case is dropped so as not to interfere with a private investigation launched by Abdi's family. Law enforcement officials at this meeting respond to the concerns voiced by Somali representatives at the last meeting.

**February 16, 2006.** The Somali CIT meets for the third time. Law enforcement and Somali community representatives address many of the issues previously raised and begin to consider possible solutions to the community's concerns.

**March 16, 2006.** Somali community representatives distribute a document outlining their major concerns and potential solutions to these issues at the fourth CIT meeting. Police handling of the mentally ill is raised for the first time.

**April 5, 2006.** First draft of document outlining action steps to be taken by Columbus law enforcement and the Somali community is created at this fifth CIT meeting.

**May 19, 2006.** Law enforcement and Somali community representatives sign the final resolution describing the actions each party will complete to resolve community concerns, agreeing to allow the CRC to monitor their compliance to this agreement.

## About the Project

The Kennedy School of Government's **Executive Session on Human Rights Commissions and Criminal Justice** convenes human rights, civil rights and police leaders from across the United States in a series of discussions about how to expand the role of human rights and human relations commissions in addressing issues of discrimination in U.S. criminal justice systems. In addition, the project aims to strengthen the ways that state and local governments respond to violations of the rights of people involved with the criminal justice system by documenting innovative work of individual commissions and conducting research on emerging practices.

Human rights commissions—in some cases known as human relations or community relations commissions—have various levels of authority to enforce civil rights laws and human rights standards, particularly those prohibiting discrimination and promising equal justice. Many also actively work to reduce and defuse inter-group conflict.

Human rights violations in the criminal justice context can take many forms. Bias crimes, and failure of law enforcement to investigate them; police mistreatment of minority groups, including racial profiling or the use of excessive force; and systematic failure to recruit minorities into law enforcement agencies: all of these forms of discrimination not only harm individuals directly involved but also victimize whole groups of people, straining communities sometimes to the breaking point.

The Executive Session, which runs from January 2006 through August 2008, employs a combination of rigorous discussion, empirical research, practical innovation and professional mobilization to expand the work of the commissions. Harvard faculty and staff facilitate the group's discussion and research. The project draws inspiration from the work of human rights commissions and ombudsmen around the globe. However, the focus of the program remains domestic, filling a peculiarly American gap in the available institutional mechanisms for redressing human rights violations related to crime and justice.

Conceived and administered by the Kennedy School's Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, the project is funded by the JEHT Foundation.

## About the Series

*Executive Session Papers: Human Rights Commissions and the Criminal Justice System* is a series of papers and case studies examining ways to expand the role of human rights and human relations commissions in addressing issues of discrimination in U.S. criminal justice systems.

The complete series is available online at [www.hrccj.org](http://www.hrccj.org)

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