

## City's Sensitivity Task Force holds 1st forum

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**By Michael Puffer**

WATERBURY — The first public forum held by the city's new Sensitivity **Task Force** attracted an audience of about a dozen to City Hall Tuesday night, one more than the number of volunteers on the panel.

The volunteer group of community activists, faith and civic leaders was called into being early this year, in the wake of a rally held in support of Muslims.

The rally, in January, was organized to push back against a rising tide of anti-Muslim sentiment.

The taskforce's mission includes investigating the prevalence of hate-based bias, bullying and intimidation against any vulnerable group, and review the systems the city has in place to respond.

The few people who did attend focused predominantly on the police department, with some praise and much concern about the lack of connection with minority communities.

"The only way to break down the barrier, in my opinion, is to show up and be open and be there, especially in the communities that are hit so often by negative activity and perceptions," said Calida Jones, artistic director of the Bravo Waterbury educational music program.

Naugatuck resident Les Williams, who describes himself as a community activist, said there's a clear "undercurrent of fear" among minorities. He asked what officers are doing to reach out to minority communities, rather than having residents approach police.

Assistant Deputy Police Chief Edward Apicella, said officers reach out in many ways, often as coaches, or through attendance of neighborhood meetings.

He said he's always open to suggestions for improvement.

Mayoral aide Monroe Webster, a city resident and longtime activist, said people in the neighborhoods also need to reach out. Too often, residents don't get involved, he said. People complain about trash or blight, but don't even report it to the city, he said.

"We got to the point we see things and it just becomes acceptable to us," Webster said. "It appears acceptable because of our lack of action."

Board of Aldermen President Paul K. Pernerewski Jr., chairing the **task-force**, said he plans to hold additional forums in neighborhood settings this fall to reach a broader range of the city.

"We do want to get out where people live, where hopefully we can get more people to come and have the same sort of dialogue," Pernerewski said.

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