

Letter to the Editor: Community forums needed on justice issues

Filed Under Opinion Letters to the Editor

Jul. 3, 2013 |

desmoinesregister.com

The question of what justice should look like in Polk County, particularly for our youth, is being asked by many in our community these days. A year ago, the Register ran an article of mine titled “Growing Past Hate.”

In light of the fact that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, the article posed two questions: How can our communities be engaged in a dialogue with justice system professionals to look objectively at what works and what doesn’t work, and whose role is it to commence this dialogue and sustain it?

In response to a recently released report by the state on disproportionate minority contact in Polk County, AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy) has raised questions about the present approach being taken by the Polk County Attorney’s Office when it comes to juvenile justice. The response by County Attorney John Sarcone and Sheriff Bill McCarthy has been to shift the attention and blame from the justice system to AMOS.

They are not only elected officials; they are public servants as well. As such, it would seem that they have a duty to invite AMOS and other concerned citizens to the table rather than continue with an isolationist approach that suggests the community doesn’t have a right to ask questions about how our justice system professionals go about their business.

The Register is to be lauded for its even-handed approach in allowing community representatives and justice system officials to articulate their respective views. Perhaps it’s time for the Register to take the next step by sponsoring a series of community forums so citizens can be educated on these critical justice issues, thereby becoming informed when it comes time to vote for our county officials in the 2014 elections.

— Fred Van Liew, director, Center for Restorative Justice Practices, Des Moines