

Joint Committee Executive Summary of Talitha Report

August 10, 2021

I. Introduction

The City's Joint Committee, which is made up of the City Council's Public Safety Committee and the City's Police Commission, was tasked in June 2020 with: a) developing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a vendor to obtain public input into the values, needs, and vision of the Burlington community on how to build a healthy and safe community and what institutions we need to reach that goal, b) reviewing RFPs and selecting a vendor to fulfill that contract, and c) reviewing and assessing the findings of the vendor's final report.

In October 2020, the Joint Committee approved the selection of Talitha consults to carry out the scope of work. The contract was approved in February 2021. Talitha Consults gave a draft PowerPoint presentation to members of the Joint Committee in June 2021 and the Committee then provided extensive feedback to Talitha at that meeting. Talitha delivered their final report in July 2021 to Racial Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Department, the City department that manages the logistics of the contract.

This memo summarizes the main findings of the Talitha report and provides the Joint Committee's assessment of the report as well as some additional analysis of the Talitha data.

II. Talitha's Main Findings

A. Talitha held two town halls in February of 2021 with a number of stakeholder organizations as well as unaffiliated residents participating. Key takeaways from their input include:

- **MEET BASIC NEEDS.** Participants argued for more investments in several key areas: houselessness, youth, affordable childcare, education, and employment. This reflected the view of many participants that ensuring public safety required that community members' basic needs be met. Underlying this stance was the view that the City must vigorously address social inequality as a predicate for a healthy system of public safety.
- **PROMOTE EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING.** There was also a strong emphasis on the importance of promoting inclusion and belonging, underscoring that race and class status influence well-being and thus public safety in Burlington. In other words, some groups more than others experience a lack of public safety in today's environment, and thus steps to promote public safety must take account and address those different circumstances and experiences. Specifically, public safety is not only about reducing crime. It also requires addressing problems of poverty and houselessness and the dearth of resources and supports for youth.
- **IMPROVE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND BPD.** Many participants identified rectifying inequitable interactions and promoting healthier interactions and relationships with the Burlington Police Department as a need to be addressed to promote public safety for all groups.
- **CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT.** Independent civilian oversight of the Burlington Police Department was a high priority for a number of participants.

B. Survey results

The Talitha survey received 1,754 responses with about half that number completing the full survey.

- **MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES** were the most frequently cited issue to address, including non-police responses to mental health calls.
- **THE TOP 3 AREAS TO ADDRESS** in an effort to promote a safer, healthier city were: *better training for first responders* (around mental health, trauma informed care, bias awareness, and de-escalation), *easier access to community services*, and *a healthier relationship for BPD with the whole community*.
- **COMMUNICATION.** Respondents also pointed to the need for BPD to improve its communications and relationship with diverse community members, especially BIPOC Burlingtonians. As importantly, respondents believe that BPD needs to create more opportunities to listen to the community's concerns.

- **CONTACTS WITH BPD.** More than half of all respondents had few if any experiences with the Burlington Police Department (61% chose 0-3 on a scale of 0-10).
- **PERCEIVED SAFETY.** Most Burlingtonians feel safe in their community and neighborhoods during the day (81% chose 7 or greater out of a 0 to 10 scale, where 10 indicates very safe). At night, that percentage, however, was 58%. However, this figure may have changed given multiple serious gun-related incidents this summer. (The Talitha report did not identify the neighborhoods correlated with these responses).
- **PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS.** About half indicate that the public input process in the form of comments, suggestions or concerns is not easy to understand (49% chose 0-3 on a scale of 0-10 where 0 means not at all easy to understand).
- **RESIDENTS & BUSINESS OWNERS.** The public safety concerns of residents differed from those of **business owners** whose focus was on **public urination/defecation, vandalism, and housing affordability.**

C. Talitha Recommendations

- **Implement an integrated public safety response system** for crises involving mental health, addiction, and homelessness (such as the CAHOOTS model).
- **Promote collaboration** between EMS providers, Fire Department, and community members.
- Referring to BPD, **improve existing channels of communication** and strive for **greater community participation in public safety planning.**
- Develop a **holistic public safety response.**

III. Joint Committee Assessment of Talitha Study

The Talitha study was carried out under difficult conditions due to COVID-19, which restricted the ability to have in-person meetings and likely inhibited wider participation.

REPRESENTATIVENESS OF SURVEY SAMPLE. The survey was not representative of the city’s demographics. Table 1 compares characteristics of the Burlington’s population with those of survey respondents. (We were not provided data on composition of participants in town hall meetings). Survey respondents were almost twice as likely to have a master’s degree or higher compared to Burlington residents. Survey respondents were also wealthier than the city’s population. Median household income in Burlington is \$51,394, implying that 50% of the households in Burlington have income above that amount (and 50% below). However, among survey respondents, 58.1% had an income above the median. A higher share of survey respondents was over 45 than in the Burlington population. The survey also had a lower percentage of Black and Asian respondents than the city’s population as a whole.

Table 1. Comparison of Burlington vs. Survey Demographics

	Burlington	Survey
Master's degree or higher	21.6%	42.8%
Above median household income (\$51,394)	50.0%	58.1%
Aged 45 or older	27.8%	55.0%
Black	6.5%	3.0%
Asian	6.5%	3.1%
Hispanic	3.1%	3.0%
White	85.3%	88.6%

It is not surprising that there is an overrepresentation of the well-educated and well-off as survey respondents. These groups tend to have more access and resources for participation in public policy discussions. The

problems associated with COVID likely also inhibited the ability to reach out to those with less resources and social status.

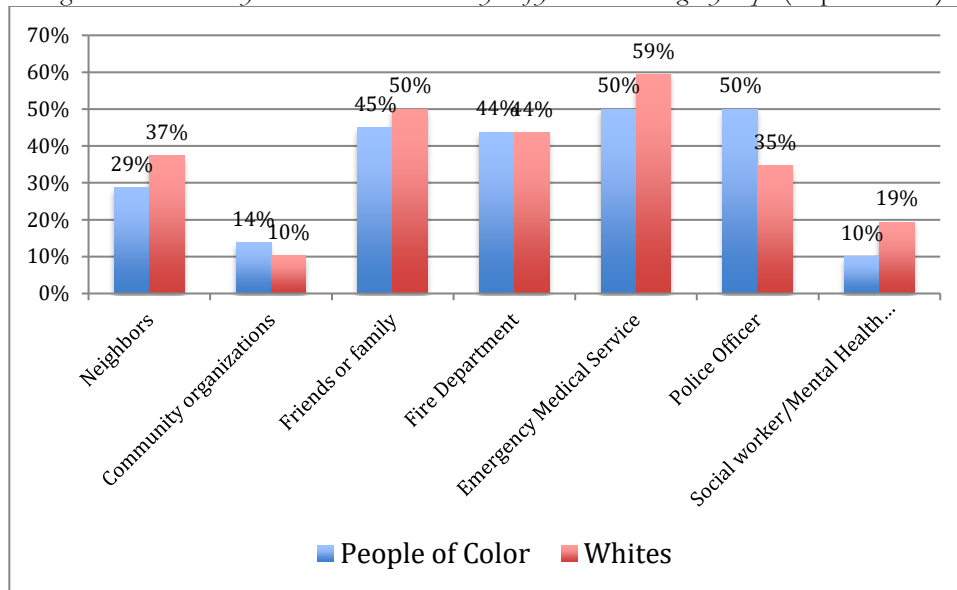
Because of this, the Joint Committee asked Talitha to weight the data so as to make the aggregate results more representative of community views.¹ Talitha indicated it had exhausted its resources with respect to the contract and thus, they did not weight results to reflect Burlington demographics.

The Joint Committee also requested that Talitha disaggregate the data by group by income, education, race, gender, and ability/disability. This is important to do because a key goal is for Burlington to create a public safety system that meets the needs of *all groups*, not just the majority, the most well-off, or the most abled. Moreover, in the lead-up to this study, it was clear that members of the community had very different experiences of public safety. Talitha responded by sending us raw data in an Excel spreadsheet. While that was useful, the presentation of the data rendered it inaccessible to laypersons.²

We can, however, report here some findings from that raw data by race. (Talitha did not report findings by gender, income, education, ability/disability, however, and we therefore cannot comment on whether there are differences with regard to public safety vision for those groups).

The data show that people of color in Burlington have more trust of the police than white people (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Who would you trust the most to assist you if you needed emergency help? (Top 3 choices)*

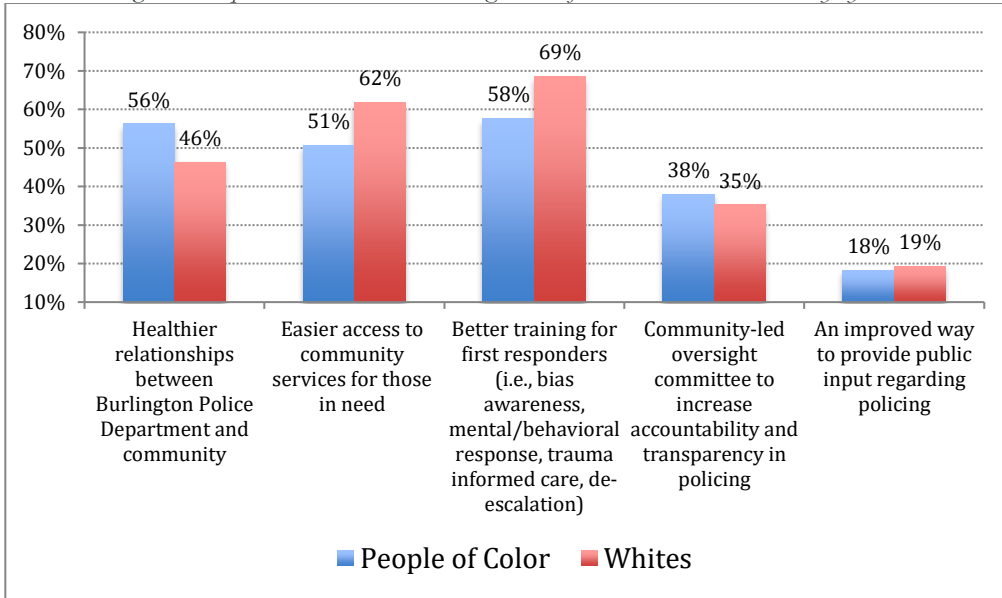


Results differed somewhat with regard to these two groups' ranking of the top 3 actions most important in the effort to make Burlington a safer and healthier community (Figure 2). Survey respondents who identified as people of color were noticeably more likely to emphasize the need for healthier relationships between BPD and the community than white respondents. That said, both groups identified the need for better training for first responders in key areas related to mental health and trauma.

¹ Weighting is commonly done in survey sampling to generate representative results.

² Their raw data is posted at <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/bpd-assessment> for those who wish to analyze it further.

Figure 2. Top 3 Actions to Make Burlington a Safer and Healthier Community by Race



The community is encouraged to read the additional quantitative and qualitative analyses of Talitha’s data, conducted by three REIB data analysts, and reviewed for accuracy and methodology by City Data Analyst John Larson.

All documents related to the Talitha consultancy are posted to <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/bpd-assessment>.