

Mesa diversity efforts pick up steam; more work needed

Maria Polletta, The Republic | azcentral.com 8:07 p.m. MST May 27, 2014

A survey of 600 residents found that while a majority of respondents feel comfortable living in Mesa, discrimination continues to plague certain minority groups.



(Photo: Cheryl Evans/The Republic)

Like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, the tone of a recent city-hosted session on discrimination in Mesa swung back and forth, back and forth.

One woman said residents of her low-income, ethnically diverse complex had no problem working together to improve the conditions of their neighborhood. But a lesbian couple said interaction with neighbors dropped off sharply after the pair corrected the assumption that they were sisters.

A Black man with a White wife said he had never been hassled for his interracial relationship within city limits. But a woman with physical limitations said waiters repeatedly assumed that she couldn't order food or pay for

herself.

The mix of experiences closely mirrored the findings of the survey that spurred the city's three Community Conversations on Inclusion and Diversity.

Conducted by Arizona State University's Morrison Institute for Public Policy, the survey of 600 residents found that while a majority of respondents felt comfortable living in Mesa, discrimination continued to plague certain minority groups. And about half of respondents — whose ethnic, religious, sexual and other identities reflected those of the Mesa population at large — rated Mesa residents' overall cultural awareness as average or below average.

"We've worked hard as a council over the last few years to try to put the heart and soul back into the community, with community-gathering events, Veterans Day parades — really looking for those opportunities so the newcomers feel welcome, included and needed," Mesa Mayor Alex Finter said. "That said, we're always needing some improvements. I heard some examples of experiences (at one of the diversity sessions) and went, 'Darn, we missed that opportunity.'"

The survey, a Mesa Human Relations Advisory Board initiative, isn't the be-all, end-all analysis of tolerance in Mesa. Results will be combined with forum feedback and online Q&A responses to provide a comprehensive report to the City Council in late summer or early fall.

But it provides a solid starting point to shed light on which Mesa subgroups are most vulnerable to bigotry or ignorance.

When asked whether they had experienced racial discrimination in Mesa within the past two years, 19 percent of all respondents said yes. That figure jumped to 38 percent for Hispanics.

About one in three respondents identifying as lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual reported discrimination based on sexual orientation, though the survey notes the limitations of the group's tiny sample size. About one in four respondents with either mental or physical disabilities said they'd experienced discrimination.

Human Relations Board Chairwoman and longtime activist Denise Heap said the responses from residents with mental disabilities worried her most because "for a lot of people who are mentally and behaviorally disabled, they can't articulate the issues."

"If you can't speak up for yourself, you're really vulnerable," she said.

For another board member, Karen Frias-Long, it was the gay community's survey responses and subsequent forum comments she found alarming.

"I think what stood out to me was ... hearing how some of the LGBT community didn't come to or embrace Mesa because they were fearful of Mesa. I was really shocked about their sharing that they felt unsafe," she said. "The good thing was, they mentioned seeing Mesa police and other representatives in the (recent Phoenix Pride) parade and how that made them feel like, 'Maybe we *can* live in Mesa.'"

Cliff Moon, who serves on the board and as chairman of Mesa's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Committee, said the geographic patterns that emerged surprised him.

Although some residents said they hadn't noticed discrimination at all, he said, "Some folks who live in a different part of the city noticed that there were either unintentional or intentional messages alluding to 'you don't belong in this city, or this particular area.'"

“Initially, I thought we’d see (those attitudes) throughout the city, but it was just in certain pockets,” he said. “It seemed to be that the farther east you got, there seemed to be tolerance in the sense of ‘we’ll only accept you here because we have to.’”

Diversity efforts

In addition to the Phoenix Pride Parade, the city already has either implemented or participated in several diversity-related efforts in recent years.

The 11-member Human Relations Advisory Board itself was created by the 1999 City Council to serve as a public forum for citizen input on diversity issues and eliminate barriers to community participation. Since then, it has helped to coordinate the annual Regional Unity Walk to raise awareness against racism and prejudice — Mesa officials and residents participate — and has conducted a range of professionally facilitated community forum and discussion events.

In 2006, the city established the Building Strong Neighborhoods Initiative. Over the course of the four-week program, residents help identify and prioritize neighborhood problems, receive training related to how to address them and form Neighborhood Action teams that work with city departments to resolve or correct the issues.

“Folks that might not have met before or didn’t feel comfortable approaching each other, now they have a way to work with each other,” said Ruth Giese, Mesa’s diversity and neighborhood-outreach administrator. “Everyone’s different and coming from different places, but now they’re working on a single purpose.”

About three years ago, the city launched its Community Cinema series, a public-education and civic-engagement initiative featuring monthly screenings and discussions of documentaries from PBS’ Independent Lens, from September through May. The most recent selection, “The New Black,” examined feelings about gay rights and same-sex marriage within the Black community.

In January, officials unveiled a street sign for a new Martin Luther King Jr. Way, formerly East Third Place, in Mesa’s historic downtown. The annual Martin Luther King Day Parade passes through downtown Mesa.

The Mesa Arts Center has hosted the Arizona Asian Festival for years.

Building tolerance

So, how can Mesa build on those successes and close the gaps identified by the survey?

A series of interviews with elected officials, city staff and activists failed to provide a clear, unanimous answer.

Heap, the board chair, is a strong proponent of Mesa establishing a formal anti-discrimination ordinance. Although specifics vary from city to city, anti-discrimination laws generally mandate that people be treated equally regardless of sex, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity and sometimes religious and political opinions.

“All my studying and experience has indicated that the first thing that you need to do to make a community accepting and inclusive is to have the city government state unequivocally: ‘Discrimination will not be tolerated,’” Heap said.

Councilman Dennis Kavanaugh said he would support an anti-discrimination ordinance if the Human Relations Board were to recommend one to the council.

“I think the survey results, as well as the community conversations, are an indicator that groups within Mesa continue to experience episodes of discrimination and that there will be community support for the board, and ultimately, the City Council to address the issue,” he said. “The recent unanimous vote by the Tempe City Council on its anti-discrimination ordinance is an example of excellent leadership by their advisory board and council. I hope we follow that same path.”

Councilman Dave Richins, however, wasn’t sold.

“I live in west Mesa, and diversity is something that we live every day. We view each others as neighbors and people and humans,” he said. “If I’m going to pass a law, I want it to solve a real problem. You can’t legislate against people’s stupidity.”

Mesa resident Judy Lawrence, who said she experienced a culture shock when she moved here from the East Coast, said she believed the consideration of an ordinance would be “where the rubber will meet the road.”

“I think that we might get a lot more very positive reactions (from the community), but it also might cause some push-back,” she said. “Either way, it might engender more public discourse. That would be a healthy thing.”

One objective nearly everyone agreed on was the need to have broader representation of minorities in leadership positions. The majority of City Council and Mesa Public Schools board members are White males.

“All those (diversity) festivities, those are well and good, but do they get (subgroups) involved in leadership and civic participation?” said David Luna, the only ethnic minority on the City Council. “With Latinos, (SB) 1070 played a major role in how they felt about the city in general.”

The Mesa Public Schools-Mesa Community College Latino Advisory Committee and the Hispanic Leadership Institute’s East Valley branch have been working to do so, he said, with slow but steady success.

Other suggestions included encouraging homebuilders to market to diverse groups; educating students on cultural differences; urging parents to explain the context and hurtfulness of derogatory terms; holding additional neighborhood and cultural events; and attempting to reach naysayers who would prefer a more homogenous community.

To share thoughts on diversity and discrimination in Mesa, visit the Human Relations Advisory Board page on mesaaz.gov by Friday, June 27.

Survey Highlights

A sampling of results from Mesa’s recent opinion survey. See more at mesa.azcentral.com.

Using a five-point scale where five means you agree completely and one means you disagree completely, rate your level of agreement with this statement: “I feel Mesa is committed to promoting diversity and inclusion.”

Average for total respondents: 3.85.

Average for Hispanic respondents: 3.82.

Average for religious respondents: 3.91.

Average for respondents with physical disabilities: 3.82.

Average for respondents with mental disabilities: 3.51.

In the past two years or so, have you or anyone in your immediate household ever experienced discrimination, exclusion or bias against, in Mesa, whether intentional or unintentional, because of:

Race or ethnicity: 19 percent of total respondents; 38 percent of Hispanic respondents.

Religion affiliation or belief, or non-belief: 12 percent of total respondents; 14 percent of religious respondents.

Physical limitations or disability: 7 percent of total respondents; 21 percent of respondents with physical disabilities.

Mental disability or limitation: 4 percent of total respondents; 25 percent of respondents with mental disabilities or limitations.

Sexual orientation: 5 percent of total respondents; 34 percent of LGBT respondents (Note: sample size too small for statistical significance.)

Social or political beliefs: 13 percent of total respondents.

Source: Mesa

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