

Group to monitor harassment at Octoberfest

Katherine Lymn, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin, 3:08 p.m. CDT September 21, 2016

APPLETON - A group working to make the Fox Cities more inclusive will debut a new initiative during Octoberfest on Saturday, a response to reports of racial slurs and harassment it has heard about from black residents.

The group, Together, We Belong, says it will use Octoberfest, Appleton's biggest community festival, as a pilot event, part of an initiative to increase inclusion and safety in Appleton for all marginalized groups.

Members of minority groups have experienced name-calling and other forms of negative treatment at past community events without a good way to report it, said Sabrina Robins, a board member of African Heritage Inc., one of the groups that has joined with United Way Fox Cities and other local organizations to spearhead Saturday's effort. Robins also is one of the organizers of last year's Plunge, a program of ThedaCare's Community Health Action Team that brought more than 60 predominately white local leaders together to learn about the black experience in the Fox Cities.

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At the Plunge and in meetings since, black residents shared stories of harassment that made them feel unwelcome in downtown Appleton during community events, Robins said.

It was shocking to the white residents participating in the Plunge as they heard about the experiences of racism and discrimination, Robins said. The Together, We Belong pilot is one idea that grew from the Plunge discussion and its safety task force.

While increasing the sense of safety and support for those on the receiving end of the harassment, organizers also want to increase awareness.

"We had too many community members that said they were not aware of racial discrimination and harassment," Robins said. "And so, this is a way to increase awareness, (and) at the same time, increase the sense of safety for African-Americans and other marginalized groups."



Sabrina Robins on raising awareness of discrimination in the Fox Cities: "We had too many community members that said they were not aware of racial discrimination and harassment." (Photo: Dan Powers/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

For four hours on the tail end of the festival on Saturday, the volunteers, dressed in light gray T-shirts with green lettering, will watch and take notes. Organizers made clear the volunteers aren't on patrol — they will be advised to report any crimes to police, and will be told to focus on the people feeling harassed, not the harassers.

Assigned to their designated College Avenue blocks, volunteers will watch for behaviors like beer-throwing, slurs or other name-calling, aggressive touching and spitting. They'll also be available to walk people to cars.

While the work since last fall has been focused on black Appleton residents, Robins said community leaders and members involved have also heard stories of mistreatment downtown from other marginalized groups — women, people identifying as LGBTQ, people with disabilities — who will benefit from those on the lookout this weekend.

The volunteers will fill a gap, as Appleton police focus on more serious incidents during a festival that annually draws an estimated 100,000 people to the downtown.

"There's incidents and things going on that in their experience does not rise to the level of criminal, so that's where we come in," Robins said.

Appleton Police Capt. Todd Freeman was among those who said he was shocked by the incidents he heard about from African-Americans living here.

Hearing of racially charged incidents at events like Oktoberfest or the weekly downtown farmers market was "eye-opening" for police, he said. And just because police can't do something about a person shouting a slur because it's not "patently illegal," they still want to know it's taking place, he said.

"So it's very nice that this can help people be heard, and help to start collecting information about how prevalent things like this are in our community," Freeman said.

Paul Shrode, chairman of the Oktoberfest committee, said he hadn't heard the concerns before the group brought them to him. He said he shares the goals of Appleton events being welcoming and inclusive.

Robins said with the community still fragmented, "it's very possible that Paul's experience is vastly different than people of color," and it's understandable that he wasn't aware people weren't feeling welcome.

Volunteers are still being sought for Saturday afternoon shifts.

"We are looking for volunteers who no longer find it acceptable to ignore poor behavior," Robins said. "It's a way of standing up and supporting the notion of 'not in our town.' Everyone will be treated with respect and not made to feel unwelcome or unwanted because of their race, gender, sexual orientation or abilities."

The data collected by volunteers, who will write down incidents they observe as well as the ethnicities and genders of those involved, will further conversations about inclusiveness.

"Fundamentally, we all want to have a better sense of whether or not there are issues at Oktoberfest," Shrode said.

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WANT TO HELP?

Who: Anyone age 21 or older; you can volunteer with a friend

When: Either 3 to 5 p.m. or 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday, with training before your shift

Where: Oktoberfest in downtown Appleton

For more information: Email Lalu.Bere@UnitedWayFoxCities.org