Following a tense, public conversation about race and policing in Grand County last week, many local officials are now looking to bring some of the ideas shared publicly into more private conversations with local law enforcement as a means of implementing some of the changes discussed and ideating on new changes to come.

Some of the officials working to start and continue these conversations with law enforcement are Grand County Council Chair Mary McGann, Moab Valley Multicultural Center Executive Director Rhiana Medina, Grand County Attorney Christina Sloan, Moab City Council Member Rani Derasary, and City Council Member Tawny Knuteson-Boyd.

McGann expressed at the end of the public conversation last week that she was hoping to dig more into the fears she said some locals have about approaching local law enforcement with problems or complaints, and she said after the meeting that is the direction she is hoping to take the conversation with Grand County Sheriff Steve White.

“I plan to work with the Full Circle Intertribal Center and the Moab Valley Multicultural Center to create a way to hear the voices of the people who find our law enforcement and judicial systems oppressing,” McGann said. “It will also be important to work with our law enforcement in a manner that will enable them to receive feedback without becoming defensive.”

Medina, who participated in the policing discussion last week, said after the meeting that she has “a deep respect” for local law enforcement and saw “so much opportunity for collaboration and new and better communication systems,” she said.
“I have an email out to see when the conversation can continue and how that will be accomplished, but no specific information yet,” Medina continued. “I would love to talk further with the city and county about which methods are in place for assessing bias within our legal and justice systems and if they are adequate.”

Medina included some of the questions she said she hopes to answer as part of these conversations, such as whether people who interface with law enforcement “feel like they are receiving fair treatment,” whether the area is using “antiquated systems for communication that could be improved,” and how to measure bias in Moab’s legal and justice systems.

“These are a few questions I look forward to discussing with our community leadership,” Medina said. “I am also actively looking for grant funding to provide bias training for local (law enforcement agencies) and other interested community members and agencies.”

Knuteson-Boyd expressed frustration during a city council meeting Tuesday, June 23 with one of the training modules that the city’s police department has used for years and that, she said, has not changed in over a decade. The training, administered by the Utah Local Governments Land Trust, is an annual training mandatory for many local officials, that covers topics of discrimination and harassment.

“I've sat through that training for 12 years,” said Knuteson-Boyd, an employee with the county roads department. “It has not changed one iota in 12 years.”

Knuteson-Boyd went on to say that she wanted to have the council come together to ask the Trust to update the training.

“I'm just wondering as a council, do you think it would behoove us to ask the Trust to update that training, because it …” Knuteson-Boyd said, pausing with a sigh of exasperation, “it kind of makes you roll your eyes and say, ‘here we go again; we've done this again; we know we don't sexually harass our coworkers;’ but it just doesn't deal with the real, hardline issues.”

Moab Mayor Emily Niehaus told Knuteson-Boyd to draft such a letter that the council will vote on, possibly at its next meeting.

Fellow Council Member Derasary has also expressed a desire to reform policing in Moab. Moab City Police Chief Bret Edge said during a presentation Wednesday night to the council that he had recently changed one of his department’s policies after a conversation with Derasary about the potential change.

Specifically, the part of the policy concerned whether and how officers intervene if and when their fellow officers use excessive force. The previous policy required officers to intervene when they see a fellow officer use excessive force, but only recommended that such instances be reported to a supervisor.

The changed policy now requires officers to report to a supervisor whenever they see a fellow officer use excessive force.