STRENGTHENING POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN AMERICA’S CITIES

A Report of The U.S. Conference of Mayors Working Group of Mayors and Police Chiefs

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THE UNITED STATES
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The events which began in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 with the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by a White police officer have brought to the forefront serious social issues that must be addressed – issues of race, class, prejudice, poverty, and inequality that are often difficult for people to talk about. These issues also underscore the complex nature of policing in communities across the country.

The decision of a St. Louis County grand jury not to indict the police officer responsible for Brown’s death compounded these issues, as did a similar verdict by a Staten Island, New York grand jury that declined to indict a White police officer in the death of Eric Garner, a Black man accused of selling cigarettes individually on the street, by an apparent chokehold. The tragic assassination of New York City police officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu on December 20 while they sat in their squad car, by an individual who claimed retaliation for the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, underscored the turmoil the nation is facing. Police officers are beleaguered and on alert and feel persecuted while risking their lives on a daily basis. These events have shaken some of the public’s perceptions of policing in America and of the criminal justice system. They have highlighted both the rift that may exist between police officers and the communities they serve and protect, and the danger which those officers face every day.

Mayors and police chiefs know full well that effective community policing is practiced in a constitutional manner by many police departments, and that the vast majority of police officers have developed trusting relationships with the communities they serve. But they also believe that this country cannot let the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner or of other men and boys of color who have died in encounters with police officers, or of Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu or other officers who have lost their lives in the line of duty, to be lost in a set of statistics. They believe that the nation must learn from these painful experiences and do everything possible to prevent them from happening again.

This report, developed by a working group of mayors and police chiefs appointed by U.S. Conference of Mayors President and Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, provides a set of recommendations for local and national actions intended to improve police-community relations in America. These recommendations emerged from discussions held by the Conference of Mayors leadership when it met in Sacramento in September and from further discussions held by mayors and police chiefs who met in Little Rock in October on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program.

The recommendations are grouped into six areas: building police-community trust, improving police department practices, ensuring timely and accurate communications, conducting independent investigations, addressing racial and economic disparities, and providing national leadership. In some instances, the recommendations go beyond the purview of mayors and police chiefs and call for actions by the broader community in cities and the nation as a whole, and by the federal government.
I. Building Trust Between Police and Community
Recent events have demonstrated that, despite instituting community policing in many departments and realizing substantial reductions in the crime rate in many cities, mistrust between the police and the communities they serve and protect continues to be a challenge that must be addressed.

A. Community policing is a philosophy, not just a program.
   1. Police officers need to interact on a daily basis with the community to develop credibility and establish an on-going dialogue with residents, including those with whom they may disagree, to help keep incidents from becoming crises.
   2. Community policing must be much more than one officer forming a relationship; it involves making inroads in the most challenged communities.
   3. Police officers should treat all people with dignity and respect. Given the history of tension, police should be particularly sensitive to minority communities. If people feel disrespected in their encounters with officers, the experience will leave a long-lasting negative impact that will be shared with family and friends.
   4. The police should engage in problem-solving partnerships with the community.
   5. Police should work to establish trusting relationships with community residents that can be the foundation for working together in times of crisis.

B. Police officers should practice procedural justice, treating all people fairly and openly.

C. Police departments should provide a consistent message that the police have a responsibility to protect protestors and their constitutional rights.

D. Police departments should provide a consistent message about police officers' responsibility to ensure their own safety and that of the community when they use force.

E. Residents need to understand that police officers are doing their job, that it's a complicated job, and that they also deserve respect.

F. Citizen academies and other educational programs can provide an effective way to educate residents on the responsibilities of police officers, and provide a forum for interacting with them.

G. Community leaders should be actively engaged by the police and the city government as a whole in their efforts to build trust.

H. It is important to recognize that there can be mixed feelings about the relationship that exists between the police and the communities they serve, and that mayors can play a critically important role in working to improve those relationships.

II. Improving Police Department Practices
Police departments, like all well-run organizations, should be reviewing their operations on a continuing basis and working to improve their procedures and practices. This effort should extend to all levels of the organization and to all
areas of work. The International Association of Chiefs of Police, Major Cities Chiefs Police Association, the Police Executive Research Forum, and the COPS Office all have materials available, some of which provide model policies that can assist departments in doing this. Recent events have highlighted some areas of particular importance. Among them: the role of the chief, recruitment, training, supervision, use of equipment, and how progress is measured.

A. The Role of the Chief
   1. The chief’s leadership, direction, focus and credibility are critical to the department’s success and to how it is viewed by the community.
   2. It is generally appropriate for the chief to take the lead, independent of the mayor, when serious incidents occur.
   3. The chief should be skilled in providing leadership in a crisis.
   4. The chief should be aware of resources and help available.

B. Officer Recruitment
   1. Police departments need to review recruiting and hiring practices to ensure they are reflective of the community they serve.
   2. Departments may need to use non-traditional means to attract recruits who are representative of the diversity in the community.
   3. At the same time, departments need to perform thorough background checks on all applicants to help ensure that those who are accepted will become good police officers.

C. Officer Training and Supervision
   1. Training should cover more than the procedures of policing. It should help police officers understand their role in a democratic society – how to engage in constitutional policing.
   2. Training must concentrate on preventing unwarranted use of force, offer officers alternatives to the use of lethal weapons, and clarify when use of lethal weapons is appropriate.
   3. Training also must concentrate on community engagement and must reinforce the importance of treating residents with dignity and respect.
   4. Officers must be trained in how to defuse incidents.
   5. Police officer training also must include methods for handling individuals exhibiting mental illness.
   6. People from outside of the department, including the clergy, should provide at least some of the training.

D. Equipment
   1. Many departments already have appropriate standards for the deployment of, and training related to, military and other equipment provided by the federal government to local police departments. These standards should be in place in all departments that have such equipment.
   2. Body-worn cameras can be an important tool, and funding to assist in purchasing cameras, providing training in and standards for their use, and appropriately storing data collected via cameras is essential if more departments are to be camera-equipped.
3. Also important is other technology, including vehicle-mounted cameras, license plate readers, and facial recognition software. Here again, additional resources must be provided to police departments to enable their use.

E. Metrics
   1. Changes are needed in the way police departments measure the efficacy of their activities. The measurement system should reflect the community policing culture and importance of prevention so that success is not based solely on rates of reported crimes and arrests.
   2. Research into how to make these changes is needed. It should include evaluation of current measurement tools and development of a new measurement system that can be used by departments across the nation.

III. Ensuring Timely and Accurate Communications
How a police department communicates with the public and the media is crucial to the success of its relationship with the community, especially when officer-involved shootings and other high profile incidents, such as demonstrations or significant crimes, occur.

A. Departments should have procedures in place to ensure that communications will be timely, transparent, honest, and as accurate as possible.
B. It is important to take into account optics – how things look.
C. Departments should understand, monitor, and make use of social media.
D. The mayor and police chief should coordinate their communications around an incident. They should:
   1. Identify when the police chief should handle the incident and when the mayor needs to be involved;
   2. Identify appropriate roles for each;
   3. Deliver a unified message, keeping individual perspectives consistent with that message.
E. The mayor and chief should develop a network of organizations with which they can communicate when an incident occurs – organizations that will be helpful in assuring the community that any incident will be appropriately investigated and addressed.

IV. Conducting Independent Investigations of Deaths Relating to Police Encounters
Recent events have heightened the importance of conducting independent, transparent, and thorough investigations so that, when an incident involving a police officer occurs, the affected community and the public are confident that all of the facts will be examined and a just decision made. This applies to both departmental and prosecutorial investigations. Investigations are dependent on state laws and regulations, and some prosecutors are required to rule on use of deadly force.
A. To increase public confidence, police departments should call on independent or outside investigators and agencies when a death occurs during an encounter with an officer. While the exercise of deadly force by an officer does not necessarily constitute a federal crime, federal authorities should be available to any city needing additional help to ensure consistent, independent and transparent investigations of deaths that occur during an encounter with a police officer.

B. There should be a vehicle to conduct independent investigations of police officer deaths, just as the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) does for firefighter deaths.

V. Addressing Racial and Economic Disparities and Community Frustration with and Distrust of Governmental Institutions

Many of the fault lines exposed by the events in Ferguson and elsewhere stem from basic problems of racism and inequality that, sadly, still exist in this country. Reducing community frustration with and distrust of the police and other governmental institutions requires a complex set of actions (some of which are specified elsewhere in this document). This cannot be fully accomplished, however, unless the nation adequately addresses the problems and inequality experienced primarily by young men and boys of color and undertakes a conscious effort to reduce racism and discrimination. Additional federal resources must be provided if this is to be accomplished. Mayors and police chiefs are encouraged, to the extent possible, to:

A. Employ best practices associated with the six goals of the My Brothers’ Keeper initiative, ensuring that all:
   1. Children enter school cognitively, physically, socially and emotionally ready;
   2. Children read at grade level by 3rd grade;
   3. Youth graduate from high school;
   4. Youth complete post-secondary education or training;
   5. Youth out of school are employed; and
   6. Youth remain safe from violent crime;

B. Utilize techniques such as study circles, community dialogues, and town hall meetings to hear from community residents, engage them in police department and other city activities, and build trust between them and institutions of government;

C. Ensure that local human rights and human relations commissions are functioning in communities and are focused in part on police-community relations;

D. Connect with state human rights commissions to determine whether a statewide plan/approach is feasible;

E. Implement the action steps called for in the Conference’s U.S. Coalition of Cities Against Racism and Discrimination, which has been adopted by more than 100 cities.
F. Concerted efforts must be made to change the dynamics of the anger focused on, and the fear of cooperating with, law enforcement that too often exist in communities. The police clearly have a role to play, along with the full range of public and private agencies, in neighborhood improvement efforts.

VI. Providing National Leadership
Ensuring police protection is primarily a local responsibility in the United States. Municipalities account for 47 percent of the nation’s expenditures on police protection and employ 48 percent of the nation’s police personnel. National action is important, however, to ensure that mayors and police chiefs are able to work together to solve common problems, share promising approaches, and influence the development of national policy. The federal government has a key role to play in supporting these efforts with both financial and technical resources.

A. Mayors and police chiefs should work together on an ongoing basis through the U.S. Conference of Mayors and police chief organizations to:
   1. Examine and develop recommendations relating to national issues and problems;
   2. Promote mayor-police chief partnerships;
   3. Provide guidance to mayors and chiefs for use in their cities when events occur.

B. The federal government should provide sensitivity, cultural, and ethnicity training, as well as training in how to defuse incidents, through the Justice Department’s Community Relations Service and other appropriate federal agencies.

C. The federal government must increase its financial support to local police departments that can be used for hiring officers, providing them needed training and equipment, and improving practices.
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