Schenectady Police Strategies to Build and Maintain Community Trust and Confidence

As we are all aware, not much more than a year ago, a dramatic shift in police and public relationships began to occur nationwide. These notable episodes will weigh heavy upon the criminal justice system for years to come and have resulted in police administrators reassessing their policing strategies. Prior to these national incidents, the City of Schenectady Police Department, with the encouragement and leadership of Mayor Gary McCarthy, focused on and strengthened our community relationships and so, fortunately, had bridged many of the gaps of communication and had developed a predominately positive and trusting relationship with our minority communities.

Following are highlights of three of several different “Procedural Justice” events in our city that have been crucial in building and maintaining our partnership with the community. These strategies have mitigated some of the barriers and forged legitimacy, accountability and transparency, as described in the report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The points stated in the Pillars are well on their way to implementation in the City of Schenectady Police Department. In particular, the following descriptions of our initiatives align with Pillar 1: Building Trust and Legitimacy; Pillar 4: Community Policing and Crime Reduction; Pillar 5: Training and Education; and Pillar 6: Officer Wellness and Safety.

Beginning in the winter of 2014 and throughout 2015, police administrators met with several groups including The Archer Group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and members of the Guyanese community. We also arranged three forums with The Archer Group, SCLC, and the Human Rights Commission that were held in January, April and August of 2015. These forums were designed to stay ahead of the controversy that surrounds law enforcement nationwide and served as a means for attendees to present their concerns and collectively discuss solutions.

Recognizing the increase in our population of Guyanese-born citizens, an in-service training program was conducted in February 2015. This invaluable training allowed leaders in the Guyanese community to collectively educate officers on the different cultural and religious traditions unique to their community. It also opened an essential dialogue that remains fluid to date.

Pillar 6 in the President’s Task Force report, which addresses officer wellness and safety, can be extended to community wellness. For the past two years and counting, officers, community leaders and Schenectady’s youth have taken to the basketball court in the Community and Police Basketball League. Played every year in Jerry Burrell Park, located in one of Schenectady’s most challenged neighborhoods, this league has continued to strengthen relationships on and off the court. With a focus on cohesiveness, officers are spread among eight teams, playing together for four weekends in July and August. The final weekend is a two-day basketball festival of sorts that includes the tournament, music, food, and even carnival games for the youngest spectators. The value of this community relations asset is immeasurable and the positive effect it has on procedural justice is essential. As stated, the impact goes far beyond the court and fosters relationships that, in turn, open lines of communication between residents and officers. (A short video showcasing the league is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mrzRg4gsWA.)

In addition, for the last five years our Police Department has joined forces with the Schenectady Inter City Ministry (SICM) Summer Lunch Program. This is a free lunch program for hungry
children that live in impoverished neighborhoods. For one week every summer, the police, along with SICM staff, serve these children lunch and spend some valuable time with them and their families or guardians, conversing and playing basketball. Overwhelming appreciation is expressed for this simple, enjoyable and effortless gathering.

At this point, we can state with confidence that we have fostered a good relationship with our community. We have established trust and transparency and recognize that our continued challenge is to maintain these relationships. And we now have empirical evidence and data that supports this: The John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety Inc. recently completed a study for our Department with support from the National Institute of Justice and U.S. Department of Justice. Entitled “Assessing Police Performance in Citizen Encounters,” the study findings were of some comfort as a community survey indicated “Fairly high levels of trust and confidence…police can be trusted to make good decisions…they have confidence in the police and they are proud of their police.”

In the separate worlds of police and community, tribulations are inevitable, but we, police and community, have an understanding, a respect for each other. We hope that the positive relationships we continuously pursue bear fruit when the inevitable transpires.

For additional information, contact Jack Falvo, Jr., Assistant Chief of Police, Field Services Bureau, Schenectady Police Department, at (518) 382-5201 or jfalvo@schenectadyny.gov, or Ryan Macherone, Detective Sergeant, Office of Professional Standards, Schenectady Police Department, at (518) 382-5200, x5644, or macherone@schenectadyny.gov.