

National Civil Rights Symposium

Wednesday, June 1, 2005

Good morning, and welcome to your nation's capital. I am glad to be here with you this morning, and I am glad that all of you have taken the time, and made the effort to join us. As a former Sheriff, I know that getting away from the day-to-day responsibilities of running a law enforcement agency is no small feat.

My experience has also taught me that managing a law enforcement agency, or being a leader of a group of armed municipal employees can be equally challenging. In fact, I remember on many occasions feeling as Ghandi felt when he said, "there go my people, I must run and catch-up so I can lead them."

I'm sure many of you can relate to that sentiment. Just because we are leaders does not always mean that we have direct control over the actions of every officer or first line supervisor under our command. While there should be no misunderstanding about the fact that the leader is ultimately responsible, having direct control of every incident that may occur is an entirely different thing.

I can recall many occasions when I felt that my career, the well-being of the citizens in my jurisdiction, the reputation of my entire agency, and whether or not I would get an ear-lashing from my boss, rested on the discretion of an individual officer and their interpretation of professional ethics.

It was at those times, often late at night or when I was out of contact with my commanders that I felt the most uneasy. Of

course, I had confidence in my leadership and that provided by my commanders. I felt confident about the training that my deputies had received, and I felt that operational and ethical responsibilities had clearly been defined and diffused throughout my agency. However, I don't think that a leader can ever feel 100 percent certain that an individual officer who is confronted with a complex, emotionally charged, and potentially life threatening incident will carry out their duties as prescribed.

It is similar to the feelings that I had the first time I let my oldest child take the car out for the night. You hope and pray that the foundation that you have laid will be enough to carry them should the going get rough, but it sure does feel good when you hear them walk back through the front door.

The thing about being the leader of an organization that operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and is looked to as the local insurer that right prevails over wrong, is that the door never stops opening and closing. It is not enough to just hope that your leadership has been adequate. In fact, adequate leadership alone is not enough to ensure that a simple call for service will not turn into a major incident involving life or death decisions, or a situation that ends up jeopardizing mutual trust and respect between your officers and the community.

That is why we are here today. Because leading a law enforcement agency in such a manner as to ensure that its' practices and policies do not compromise the civil rights of citizens is not a simple or straightforward thing. Particularly, given the type of incidents that officers become involved in. Particularly, given that each one of the officers under your

command comes to this job with different backgrounds, understandings, and predispositions. Particularly, given that even officers with the best intent can become hardened and insensitive after years of dealing with incidents that present the ugly side of society.

My remarks are in no way meant to condemn officers for having a poor perspective on civil rights issues. On the contrary. My job brings me in contact with chiefs and sheriffs from every corner of the country, and I have yet to meet one who has not, in some form, come up through the ranks.

So, we know and understand what our officers are dealing with and how difficult it can be to maintain balance in a charged environment. We know that what is clear to us in the office, can be a blurry maze to the officer on the street interpreting a

situation in real-time. Yet, we also know that it is our responsibility to provide that clarity.

When an opportunity to host this session with the Civil Rights Division first surfaced, I was very enthusiastic about it. I am a firm believer that nothing erodes stability in a community or confidence in law enforcement like the unethical application of our authority, or the violation of the civil rights of citizens.

Three years ago, the Anti-Defamation League and the Holocaust Museum here in Washington approached COPS about supporting a training class for law enforcement on lessons learned from the holocaust. The class was offered during two of our national conferences and we even provided support for the class to be extended to officers in two cities. The response to this class by officers, has been tremendous.

The class actually engages officers in the process of examining their role in the protection of citizen's civil rights.

History tells us that in Nazi Germany, leading up to World War II, law enforcement lost sight of this responsibility.

Instead of acting as the purveyor of rights, they became a major contributor to the dissolution of rights, which furthered an atmosphere that gave rise to one of the greatest violations of civil rights that the world has ever known. There have obviously been other severe violations of civil rights by law enforcement, but this class uses the holocaust as the primary example.

The class does not preach to officers, it is not a history class, nor does it minimize the impact of all of the factors that contributed to the holocaust. But, it does encourage officers to

understand the moral obligation incumbent in their responsibilities, and it causes them to look at public expectations for them to ensure the protection of individuals' civil rights, and to balance those expectations with their patrol behavior.

Here in Washington, Chief Ramsey, the head of D.C.'s Metropolitan Police Department even made it required training for all officers, and I think he would say that the training has paid dividends time and time again.

If the public cannot depend on law enforcement executives to fairly and ethically enforce the law, without compromising civil rights, then they have no recourse except to be distant from us.

I imagine that when the vast majority of the public considers this issue, their thoughts can best be described toward law enforcement as either, “they are with us, or they are against us”. I too suggest that there is no middle ground.

As leaders, we are either taking the necessary steps to ensure the civil rights of citizens, or we are not adequately fulfilling our responsibilities. Nor, are we reciprocating the confidence entrusted to us by the public, our bosses, society, and even our officers. They each expect us, the leaders of the organization, to be the protector of civil rights and to accept responsibility for putting measures in place to ensure that these rights are not systemically compromised.

So, as we move forward today, I trust that you will find this symposium both interesting and informative. Do not be

bashful, and do not think that the challenges that your agency is facing are all that different than those that have been, or are being confronted by other agencies.

Being challenged by civil rights violations does represent a shortcoming; not responding to the challenges is where we fail our communities, our officers, our profession, and the public trust.

Thank you.