

Maintaining Public Trust

Let me begin by saying the events which took place on February 26, 2012 involving Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman was the preverbal “Straw that broke the camels back”. Race relations in the City of Sanford had been a concern for a hundred years before this event occurred. The City of Sanford had faced many race related issues. Most notably:

- The all-white swimming pool in the downtown area was filled in with concrete to prevent blacks from swimming in it.
- Multiple beatings by police officers and police family members where there were failures to prosecute.
- Failing to follow through with the prosecution of crimes as they related to the African-American community.
- The Jackie Robinson Story (42) of being forced out of Sanford.
- Prior officer misconducted and shootings.
- Failure of City Hall to take action at times when information was brought to their attention.

So understandably, unresolved concerns from people of color had remained as an unlit fuse for many years. It took the circumstances surrounding this event to bring those issue to the surface. During this event, 15 to 20 thousand people from around the nation and world descended upon the City of Sanford in peaceful rallies and marches.

Changing the Perception

On April 1, 2013, 14 months following the death of Trayvon Martin, I took over as the Chief of Police at the Sanford Police Department. Within a short time, I quickly determined that the community’s perception of the police was that of a divided department full of racist officers whose conduct was seen as acts of willful and wanton disregard of professional or courteous treatment. A perception that “Cowboys” were running the department without any accountability for their actions and a Command Staff/Administration who covered up the actions of the officers within the department.

What I began to realize was that the department was having its own share of internal issues which needed to be addressed. There was a lack of foundation, a lack of leadership, no true direction, no support system for the officer/employees and no desire to serve the community.

As an example, prior to my arrival, the Sanford Police Department experienced nine Police Chief changes in less than six years. In my opinion, seeing a continuous change in Police Command over a short amount of time created a great deal of the issues within the department.

What I also realize was that the internal conflicts were being carried over into the community. The disconnect within the departments command structure, the dis/mistrust among the officers,

the lack of leadership or accountability was worn on the sleeves of the officers when they engaged or disengaged with the community.

Therefore before reconnecting with the community and building a foundation to re-gain trust, we needed to address the issues within the department. Here's what we did:

- I set up an Employee Advisory Committee because the department did not have a conflict resolution plan in place to deal within internal issues.
- I created an open door policy to meet with the officers at any time.
- I would meet with the officers during their lunch; attend parties and celebration with employees which was not often done.
- We held the first ever Police Officer Memorial Ceremony.
- When citizens send e-mails regarding the good conduct of an officer, I share them with the entire department.
- We change the department's artifact from the recommendations made by the officers. (New Badges and Patches)
- We allowed the officers to make recommended changes within their areas of responsibilities, gave them the tools to accomplish those actions and allowed the time to improve their relationships with the community.
- We brought in the Department of Justice to conduct Ethics Training for all department personnel.
- We brought in training for law enforcement personnel on Fair and Impartial Policing through the Department of Justice. The goal was to train our personnel on how to overcome bias-based policing and we invited members of the community to attend some of this training.

Community Trust Building

Many disenfranchised members of the community strongly felt disrespected by the police and other government related entities. Sometimes "Where Words and Deeds" may have good intentions, there are times where it can be disruptive if viewed as disrespectful. I believe we all understand the "Golden Rule" to treat others like you want to be treated. We based our encounters on the "Platinum Rule" to treat others like THEY want to be treated! This way, you meet others' expectations, which may be different than your own.

My goal was to get into the community, to walk in the community, meet in the community, eat with the people within the community and become a fixture in the community. If you're not willing to take a chance on the community, they will not take a chance on you. Once a week we picked a neighborhood and did a "Walk and Talk." These are informal opportunities for Sanford residents to speak one-on-one with our agency's Command Staff /officers and ask questions about crime and quality-of-life issues in their neighborhoods. After which we would work with other department to address those concerns.

I learned that by spending time listening to the community for even five minutes, we began to rebuild trust; we opened lines of communication that had never existed and put the human face of policing in the community.

I also created "Sweet Tea with the Chief" which is an informal opportunity for Sanford residents to speak one-on-one with the Police Chief, Deputy Chief, Patrol Operations Captain and Strategic Services Captain about crime and quality-of-life issues in their neighborhoods. This monthly meeting provides two things:

- For the community it provided a continued venue to vent their concerns and get immediate answers to their questions.
- For us, the community meetings give us a venue to educate the community on the operational aspects of their police department.

Organizational Structure (Shared Services, Consolidation)

A major issue in every law enforcement agency is "Recruiting" personnel who reflect the community they are policing. Recruiting within our department had to change. We had to go out and look for those who reflect the community and recruit the best candidates from within those groups. The communities we focus on were Black, Hispanic, Muslim and Asian. The purpose of the newest diverse class of officers is to restore the community's trust and confidence within the department. In Sanford, all of our recruiting procedures have been overhauled to place a greater /higher focus on evaluating communication skills (high frequency task) through scenario based selections. We are now one of the most diverse law enforcement agencies in Central Florida in comparison to the demographics within our county and the size of our agency.

A Community Relations Unit and Neighborhood Response Unit were both created in 2013.

The mission of the Community Relations Unit is to foster, maintain and enhance the bonds/relationship between the Sanford Police Department and the culturally diverse public it serves. To create and implement community-based programs and to increase the knowledge and understanding about community based policing. The Unit is tasked with establishing, building, and sustaining relationships in all the communities within the City of Sanford.

Some of the programs we offer to the community include: A refocused Neighborhood Watch Program; the creation of the first Hispanic Outreach Program within Seminole County; refocused Elder Services; Burglary Prevention; Homeless and Mental Health Outreach and the Chaplains Program. The Community Relations Unit also serves as a liaison with the Black, Hispanic, Muslim and Asian leaders.

In addition to the Community Relations Unit, all officers are required to develop and maintain a working relationship and programs within their respective areas.

The Neighborhood Response Unit was created to combat violent crime within the City of Sanford. The unit is designed to supplement the day-to-day operations of uniform patrol officers by focusing primarily on violent crimes which demand more law enforcement attention than a normal patrol response. The mission of the Neighborhood Response Unit is: To address quality of life issues through intelligence gathering, surveillance techniques, other law enforcement resources, and proactive 'hot spot' policing, outlines the mission of the unit. A primary focus of the unit is to take a proactive approach to fighting and deterring street level criminal activity and utilize a variety of tactics to combat the issues. To list some of the primary street level activity such as: drug dealing, prostitution, gang related incidents, and targeting career criminals. The Community Relations Unit and the Neighborhood Response Unit work in separate but equal capacity dealing with community issues.

Building System Partnerships (both in and out of criminal justice systems)

A Blue Ribbon Panel was established to assess the strengths and challenges of the Police Department regarding community relationships. Twenty-three stakeholders representing a diverse broad cross section of the community sat on the panel. Over the course of six months, testimony was taken from the community and the Sanford Police Department's relationship with the community was researched.

The Panel developed strategies to strengthen relationships with the community based on inclusion, trust and mutual respect for each other's roles and responsibilities; strategies to promote and practice the use of effective communication that crosses racial, cultural, and ethnic barriers; and strategies to create a shared vision and common commitment to community policing and crime prevention.

Within 18 months, many - if not all - of the recommendations have been accomplished or have become programs which will remain as a continuous part of moving the Sanford Police Department and the City of Sanford forward.

Health Department: We developed programs to assist with mental, physical and social health needs within the community. Develop program to combat hunger, youth pregnancies and drug use/abuse throughout the community.

Recommendations

- 1) Changing the perception of law enforcement within the community and within the Law Enforcement Agency as well.
- 2) Transparency: In our day to day operations; In the Administration of internal and external investigation; the use of and procedures for the wearing and use of body worn camera systems.

- 3) Open the lines of communication: Providing the community with a platform to address issues and concerns. In Sanford, several monthly meetings take place which allows the community the opportunity to express their concerns. Examples:
 - Westside community meeting in which all department heads attend. The goal is to listen to the community concerns and to provide solutions to solve them.
 - Sanford's Pastors Connecting: Meet with the local leaders, clergy, chamber, and community activists to address issues and concern placed before them within the community
 - Monthly meeting with the Chief and Command Staff to address issue with the community. Fondly enough it's called Sweet Tea with the Chief.
 - Attending church services from different denominations and faiths.
- 4) Take the time to educate the community on the laws which affect them. How often do we hear the complaint that "I didn't know". A better educated community makes for a safer community.
- 5) Make yourself available to the community. Providing the community with an understanding of the direction the department is taking. Having breakfast, lunch and dinner within the community. Easier for smaller communities but none the less each officer should be doing the same.
- 6) Always expect the unexpected and get in front of the issue when they occur. We've seen what happens when we wait or prolong an issue before addressing it.
- 7) Internally: Address the concern within your organization before the community does. Ensuring that you are gut or fact checking your personnel before issues or unacceptable behaviors are displayed within the community.
- 8) Allowed the officer to make recommended changes within their areas of responsibilities, gave them the tools to accomplish those actions and the time to improve their relationships with the community.
- 9) Bring in the Department of Justice to conduct Ethics Training for all department personnel. Looking for free training which will help you protect your officers and the community. It is a win-win situation for both groups.
- 10) Bring in the training for law enforcement personnel on Fair and Impartial Policing through the Department of Justice. My entire department took part in this bias-based policing and operational functions. From the maintenance man to Chief, we all have some form of bias.
- 11) Inviting the community to take part in the training is a little uncomfortable at times but a necessary step in building trust, creating open dialogue and ensures that they understand how the laws work.
- 12) Work with the local Department of Health to determine the mental, social and physical health needs of the community. Establish programs to improve the quality of life for those most in need.