

Policing a Community in Flux

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“Geert Hofstede, Emeritus Professor at Maastricht University, the Netherlands, says, “Culture is more often the source of conflict than synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster.”

As you have heard from Professor Stull, Garden City, Kansas is a city with a constant stream of newcomers. With that stream of newcomers come new challenges for service providers, of which law enforcement is no exception.

Garden City is in a constant state of flux and in order to serve all citizens in an equitable manner law enforcement personnel in Garden City are in a constant state of learning, in order to avoid the disaster which Hofstede suggests. Avoiding the nuisance is an even loftier, yet often times attainable goal.

Hofstede also says that, “while realizing there are exceptions in every society, for the most part every country has an overall cultural perspective and its people look at things in a perspective unique to that country.” Immigrants have come to Garden City with cultures that include elements contrary to state and local laws and sometimes from cultures where law enforcement is not looked upon as a trusted source of assistance. This phenomenon has challenged law enforcement, which is typically used to coming to the aid of citizens in need and used to playing the role of good-guy.

The concept of accepting new cultures and peoples is a given, it’s just a matter of learning the idiosyncrasies of each new group. Therefore, the training is almost constant, or at least frequent.

For law enforcement this means a necessary familiarization with the culture of the country of origin of new arrivals in Garden City, understanding that cultures are different and it means learning to communicate in an understandable and inoffensive manner, while still maintaining the necessary control over a situation to keep everyone safe. Understanding that eye-contact and information sharing are not culturally wide-spread helps officers adjust investigative procedures and interviewing methodology. Just as officers became accustomed to addressing the elders in Asian families in the mid-80s, officers have now become accustomed to large groups of Somali residents gathering around and holding loud conversations while the officers investigate and gather information. At first it was perceived as a threatening situation, but through mutual education it has become normal. The same was true with new arrivals in the 80s when it was not uncommon for a person to offer a bribe to an officer who had stopped him or her. Understanding that they came from a culture where offering money to police

officers was an accepted practice avoided conflicts. It would be an offense worthy of an arrest under normal circumstances in the U.S.

Without reiterating the history of immigration to Garden City, the steady stream of Hispanics, Vietnamese, Burmese, Somali, and whatever the (next wave is) has made on-going training for law enforcement personnel a must. At the same time, it has also made on-going training for the new arrivals a must as well. The training and re-training is constant and it includes strategic relationship building with new arrivals.

Training and education is not only provided to Garden City Police Department personnel, but is also offered to and readily accepted by new arrivals, generally through cooperative efforts with local businesses, social service organizations, Garden City Community College, Unified School District 457.

It is not uncommon for GCPD personnel to meet with Somali residents on a Saturday or Sunday, or Vietnamese or Hispanic groups to explain local laws, regarding driving, curfew, or anything of a current interest to specific groups. Some are all-day sessions regarding domestic violence and have turned into a series of continuing education programs.

Media, especially radio, is a great way to connect with the Hispanic population and I do a monthly call-in radio show on the Spanish language station, where people can ask questions or comment about law enforcement issues.

The Garden City Police Department prints informational brochures in Spanish, Vietnamese and Somali, that address recurrent law enforcement themes, such as curfew, driving under the influence and how to report crimes.

The actual costs of training in cultural awareness are minimal in the scheme of a six point five million dollar annual budget. Officers require annual re-certification training and cultural awareness certainly falls into the qualified training category. The training of new arrivals is also minimal, in that there are officers on the clock 24 hours a day, seven days a week and there is always someone available to provide education. These are always pre-scheduled events and finding personnel to conduct awareness training for new arrivals is never a problem.

The rewards of both receiving training and providing education are both tangible and intangible. Law enforcement cannot operate effectively in a community where the citizens do not trust those sworn to protect and serve them. Demonstrating an understanding of the differences in culture, while treating every fairly under the law builds confidence and trust. When things go awry in the community, it is usually with the help of citizens that crimes are solved and ultimately adjudicated. In the 80s it took a long time for the Vietnamese and other Asian communities to understand and trust the police. Through continual relationship building endeavors and an armed robbery of a Vietnamese store, the

community began to realize that the police were the good guys. Because the victims were willing to provide information the bad guys were apprehended a very short time after the robbery. A little cooperation and a little luck helped build a stronger relationship between police and the Asian community.

Continual reiteration that local law enforcement is not interested in the immigration status of victims of crimes helps encourage the community to report crimes when they occur.

Immigration has had a huge impact on Garden City law enforcement training and personnel.

This constant state of flux has created, in a very positive sense, the diversification of law enforcement and created a demand for a more diversified workforce. There are more minority and bilingual officers and more minority and bilingual non-sworn personnel than at any time in the history of the GCPD. This not only attracts more minorities to the workforce, but allows part of the non-English speaking population to call in and report incidents. For those languages not spoken by personnel, the GCPD maintains a pool of available citizens to translate.

Garden City Police Department doesn't necessarily have the perfect answer to policing a community always in transition, but that's how we do it.