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Community Policing: A Mechanism for Successful Assimilation of Immigrant Cultures into Our Communities

In her article “Beyond Enforcement: Welcomeness, Local Law Enforcement, and Immigrants,” Linda M. Williams reaches compelling conclusions that are valuable to the law enforcement community. The article offers a systematic measure for determining the effectiveness of any outreach effort we may undertake within our communities. Her research and conclusions affirm the importance of collaboration between professional law enforcement executives and researchers in order to meet the challenges of our profession in the twenty-first century.

Law enforcement agencies are functional in our practices and conservative in our approaches to change. This functional conservatism works well to preserve law enforcement culture and practices that have been shaped by our institution of justice. It also works to produce unwillingness to try new ways in the absence of empirical research to guide and support such change. For many policing agencies, that new way is community policing, a defined approach that encourages partnerships, problem solving, and prevention of crime. Resolving social issues has proved to be an effective deterrent to preventing crime.

The law enforcement community understands and accepts the fact that the most vulnerable members of any community are those nearest the poverty line. Social issues resulting from poverty are among the many obstacles to successful assimilation into our culture. The most challenging of tasks is to find the resources to lift our immigrants out of poverty. Although police agencies are not primarily social service providers, our position in the community often allows us a keen awareness of social resources and how best to maximize access to those services.

Williams’s research can guide us in providing community policing resources to our immigrant communities. She outlines a systematic approach to ensuring the success of an agency attempting to become a “welcoming department” or one perceived as an “unwelcoming department.”

The article identifies five dimensions of “welcoming” practices. Incorporate these five cornerstones into your agency practices, and there is a high probability that successful integration of your immigrant communities will begin with the police department and be carried forth by example into the community-at-large. The following is an outline of how the Urbandale Police Department intends to use the five dimensions in our community policing practices.

1. **Providing in-language resources:** Law enforcement invests millions of dollars in our communication networks but little in improving the public’s reception of our message. Simply demonstrating our willingness to understand our community would signal “welcomeness.” This next year, my organization, the Urbandale Police Department, will provide more agency and social program resources in the native languages of our community. We will provide online resources in native languages as well as English. We will expand our on-call interpreter list where necessary and ensure that our language line provider meets our expectations.

2. **Community outreach:** Our department already has a strong program of community outreach within our traditional city boundaries. We have now begun to extend that program to substantive discussions of police policy beyond those boundaries to the greater metropolitan area.

3. **Collaboration:** We seek to engage the larger community in dialogue on issues such as recruitment, body cameras, antiprofiling, diversity awareness training, and other matters of concern to our greater metropolitan public. We are committed to a collaborative effort to create policy that reflects the results of such dialogue. Because we believe that
law enforcement entities know best the available resources needed to help our most vulnerable community members, we can partner with the community by coordinating those specialized services and bringing them to bear most effectively to resolve social issues and prevent escalation of crime.

4. **Staff training:** We forbid profiling and expose our personnel to examples of diversity. Now, to assist our police officers’ understanding of diverse cultures, we will begin training on the cross-cultural aspects of our new communities. Supporting these training concepts through policy will be integral to embedding “welcomeness” within our business practices.

5. **Enforcement:** We do not find it necessary to confirm immigration status during encounters with our community. We assert the fact that we are not authorized to enforce immigration law and that it is the responsibility of the federal government. That does not mean we will ignore any legitimate court order to place a hold on any individual; of course, we will honor such requests. But we will not intercede to hold a person without such authority. These procedures become particularly important to law enforcement while assisting victims of crime, ensuring we do not victimize the person a second time.

Based on “Beyond Enforcement: Welcomeness, Local Law Enforcement, and Immigrants,” my agency’s efforts for our immigrant community qualify us as a “neutral department.” By incorporating the policies and practices outlined here, we will achieve status as a “welcoming department” and community. Although we have accomplished some great things for our immigrant community, we now have a guidebook to complete the “welcoming department.”

I intend to incorporate the research and conclusions of Williams’s work into our internal processes, ultimately improving my department’s community policing efforts for our community. I recommend that any police executive attempting to systematically improve community policing efforts should do the same.