Strengthening Relations Between Police and Minority Communities

Ensuring accountability for effective policing in Chicago’s diverse neighborhoods

S P E C I A L  R E P O R T

C H I C A G O  P O L I C E  D E P A R T M E N T
Progress Thus Far

As he began his third year as the top cop in Chicago, Police Superintendent Terry Hillard took time to reflect on the Department and the progress that has been made during his tenure.

- Community policing strategy—CAPS—recognized as one of the most successful community/police partnerships in the country.
- Major strides in crime reduction.
- Many Department members demonstrating compassion and courage in their day-to-day work.

“What the Superintendent has embarked upon is a beginning and not an end — an intelligent discussion about the performance of the police department as it relates to the community” — Community Participant

CPD’s Goal: The Best Service Possible

Although the prognosis was good, Hillard knew the positive outlook was not shared by all—especially in some of the City’s minority communities. In a letter to community leaders Hillard stated, “I believe our relationship with the community today is stronger than ever. Like the head of any good customer-oriented business, however, my job is to ensure we provide the best service possible.”

Similar to many other major city police departments, in recent months tensions have sprung up between police and the members of some of Chicago’s minority communities. Knowing that he would not be able to fully accomplish his goals—goals that recognize that without all of the community’s support and trust, the Department’s best efforts would fail—Hillard decided to take on the issue of race relations between Chicago Police and the citizens they serve. He decided to examine the practices and policies that may be causing the tension and the perceptions that feed them. Recognizing that to do this without the involvement of the community partners that have made CAPS so successful would be foolhardy, he decided upon a proactive approach—ask the customer.
Asking the Customers

Hillard decided to go right to the source—the leaders of some of the City's minority communities—for a clear reading on the problem, real or perceived. He decided to sponsor a day-long forum on race relations between police and Chicago's minority communities. To facilitate the forum, he reached out to Dr. Chuck Wexler, the Executive Director of the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). PERF is a Washington DC-based organization dedicated to improving policing and advancing professionalism through research and involvement in public policy debate. Wexler had previously been successful in convening a group of the nation's major police chiefs and a community representative from their jurisdictions to discuss police/community race relations.

“This is the first time I have been asked to come to the table about such an important issue when the City was not in the aftermath of some overwhelming crisis.”

— Community Participant

The Right Mix

Wexler talked it out with Hillard and his executive command staff. They decided for the discussion to be fruitful is was essential to have the right mix of people at the table. First, it was agreed that personal invitations would be made to an equal number of police and community representatives and that the group size would not exceed 32 members. In addition to his top command staff, Hillard hand-picked Department members from all ranks to participate in the forum. In recruiting the community leaders, Hillard looked for people who would “tell it like it is”—those who had previously voiced their criticism of the Department when it was deserved, but who were also willing to be supportive of the Department's efforts when that was warranted. Although a letter of invitation was sent, Hillard personally reached out to many members of the group, explaining the importance of the event and urging their attendance. The personal effort helped and the response was positive, if sometimes guarded.
1. What issues challenge the relationship between the police and the City’s minority communities?

2. In your experience, what five measures have worked best to strengthen the relationship between minority populations and the police? Why?

3. In addition, what other recommendations would you make that would improve minority communities’ relations with the police?

4. No doubt, you have heard the term “racial profiling.” What does this term mean to you?

5. To what extent do you think racial profiling exists in the United States? To what extent do you think it exists in Chicago?

6. What specific strategies might both the police and community implement to achieve both effective crime reduction while at the same time respecting people’s rights to fair and impartial treatment?

7. If you were the police superintendent, what efforts would you undertake to improve police relations within minority communities?

8. What role should community leaders play to improve relations between the police and minority communities?

Getting Participants Focused

To get the participants focused on the topic prior to the meeting, a survey of key questions was sent out. The answers to the questions were aimed at:

- Identifying the nature and extent of the problem.
- Documenting best practice solutions.
- Soliciting ideas about what the Police Superintendent could do.
- Soliciting ideas about what the community could do.
- Determining how terminology and semantics effect the problem.

Answers to the questions did not require the respondent’s identity, other than whether they were a police or community participant. The responses were thoughtful and direct. Most respondents openly revealed their identity—a harbinger to the discussion to come. The surveys were compiled by question and organized by police and community response. Prior to the meeting, they were shared only with Wexler and the police command representative coordinating the meeting. They served as an aid to Wexler in focusing the discussion. They were also useful as a supplement to the notes taken at the meeting when it came time for Wexler and the Department coordinator to frame the public statement concerning the event.
Minority Communities

A Day of Discussion, A Simple Agenda

The meeting took place at the City’s historic Cultural Center, beginning at 10:00 a.m. and running over the planned 4:30 p.m. ending because of the group’s involvement. Although the community representatives all had busy schedules and several had previous commitments, not one member left until the end. The agenda for the day was straightforward.

1. Community Speak
   During the morning, each community representative offered his or her thoughts and perspectives on the issues with Wexler asking questions, clarifying points, challenging positions, and stimulating discussion. During this discourse, police representatives were not allowed to speak.

2. Informal Relationship Building
   Sharing a box lunch, both groups mingled and informal discussions sprang up.

3. Police Speak
   For the first part of the afternoon, the police representatives were heard. They reacted to what they heard from the community leaders in the morning and presented their own perspective on the issues. During this discussion, community representatives were not allowed to speak.

4. Reaching Consensus
   Finally, to wrap up the forum, Wexler facilitated a group discussion focusing on the problems, ideas and perceptions that had emerged during the day.
Strengthening Relations Between Police

Message Delivered, Message Received

The ability to openly discuss problems and perceptions together, resulted in the delivery of a clear message to Hillard—**the Department needed to balance effective crime control strategies with an equal appreciation of how citizens are treated**. More precisely the message was that while community members and police deserve credit for helping to reduce crime in Chicago for eight years in a row, **reducing crime cannot be accomplished at the expense of losing the trust and active involvement of any of our community partners**.

At the end of the day, the group reached an important consensus—to move forward, the following issues must be addressed:

**COMMUNICATION**

A lack of effective communication was identified by both community participants and police as a major source of tension. We also heard that language and cultural differences, especially among immigrant and refugee communities, too often stand in the way of the development of effective relationships.

**RESPECT**

There is a perception on the part of the community that there is a lack of respect for people as human beings—especially within the minority communities. Police also expressed concern that citizens make generalizations of all officers based on a particular negative experience they may have.

**ACCOUNTABILITY**

Community participants expressed concern about a disciplinary system that appears to be unwieldy and unresponsive. Police participants agreed to deal with this perception and do more to streamline the process and communicate with the community about the outcomes.

**FREEDOM FROM FEAR**

For too many members of the minority community—especially young males—fear of encounters with the police is driving a wedge between police and neighborhood residents. This is creating an unacceptable “us vs. them” environment. Police also acknowledged that, for some officers, there is apprehension about how they will be judged if they make an honest mistake.

**TRUST**

Participants expressed concern that some police officers did not have an understanding of their communities, nor a commitment to working in partnership with them.
and Chicago’s Minority Communities

The Proactive Approach Pays Off

“I wanted a candid assessment of where we are with respect to police/community relations, and that’s just what I got.” Hillard said. In my 32 years as a police officer in this City, I never heard such honest, heartfelt, and forthright dialogue.” One community leader commented that this was the first time in his memory that community leaders were convened to discuss such an important issue when the City was not in the aftermath of some overwhelming crisis.

The community leaders freely expressed their concerns about the relationship between police and their communities. They also recognized the difficulties and complexities faced by police. In the end, their insights challenged the police to take a hard look at the way some Department members interact with the community they serve. The police representatives also responded openly to the concerns of the community, and, in turn, shared many of the frustrations they experience.

Hillard Vows to Make Five Issues #1 Priority

At a press conference held the following week, flanked by the members of Forum, Hillard outlined the five issues noting their seriousness and vowing to work with the community to face them head on. He acknowledged that race relations and policing in this country is a serious and real problem and expressed confidence that with the help of people like the Forum members, solutions could be found. “At our meeting, we heard a willingness on the part of police and community leaders to confront this issue now—both at a citywide level and in each of our neighborhoods.”

The Work Begins

Immediately following the Forum, Hillard convened 92 of his top managers in a weekend retreat to discuss the issues and to charge them to put together concrete steps of action to address them. “I told them to critically examine everything we do, and to make recommendations to me about how we can strengthen what we do—everything from recruitment ... to selection and promotion ... to training ... to how we engage and disengage the public in our encounters... to informing the public on how we investigate and discipline our own officers.”

“As we develop short and long term strategies that will change our culture and the way we interact with our customers, one thing is for sure,” Hillard said, “this group will continue to help make sure we are on the right track.”

“This is a people issue. People know they need the police and the police know they need the people. We just can’t pit ourselves against each other.”

— Community Participant
“You have 10 positive encounters with the police, and that’s good; but all you need is one negative encounter and all the positives disappear. I want 11 positives. ... Yes, my expectations are high.”

“In a city as diverse as Chicago, we know there will always be differences among people. But what’s special about Chicago today is that we are moving beyond those differences to pursue our common interests. The fact is, no matter who you are or where you live, you want the same things: safer streets, better schools for our children, decent jobs and a good quality of life. And we know that we work best when we work together to achieve these things.”

Richard M. Daley, Mayor
Terry G. Hillard, Superintendent of Police

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