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Building trust key to preventing civil unrest, suburban police chiefs say



Video: Elgin police symposium



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Preventing civil unrest the likes of what occurred in Ferguson, Missouri, and the more recent Baltimore riots is a matter of building trust and a relationship with the communities and training officers better not only in the use of force but customer service, law enforcement officials say.

Police chiefs from Elgin, Aurora, and Sanford, Florida, and state and federal law enforcement officials talked about lessons learned from Ferguson and protests in other parts of the country over police shootings, and how to prevent a similar situation from happening in the suburbs during a symposium Wednesday at Elgin Community College.

"There's no silver bullet," Elgin Police Chief Jeff Swoboda said. "What we do is have genuine conversations with people."

When residents call 911, "they want somebody who shows up, who will treat them with dignity, respect and who will listen," he said. "I promote people in the police department who are active in the community."

The symposium, sponsored by the Kane County state's attorney's office and the U.S. Department of Justice, included community and faith leaders from throughout the county. Officials talked about community policing, civil rights and the use of force, and police departments self-monitoring for abuses.

"We have experienced officer-involved shootings here in Kane County, several over the last few years, but we have avoided the protests and demonstrations that have occurred in other parts of the country," said Kane County State's Attorney Joe McMahon, adding that's largely due to the professionalism and outreach of police departments.

Elgin and Aurora police departments encourage participation in programs such as citizens police academies, youth cadets/explorers, coffee with the chief, and community meetings as a means of engaging the community and having an open dialogue.

Yet, officials recognize, for all their efforts, it doesn't mean problems won't arise.

"There are many times officers make mistakes, do things they shouldn't have done," Swoboda said. "The most important thing we can do is talk about it. Let's have honest conversations that police officers are human, and if they mess up or don't act properly, they shouldn't be police officers."

Having face-to-face conversations with community members goes a long way toward mending broken relationships, officials said.

"Sanford wasn't a law enforcement issue. It was a race issue," said Sanford Police Chief Cecil Smith, a former deputy chief with the Elgin Police Department, speaking about protests after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was gunned down Feb. 26, 2012, while walking in his gated community.

Smith said roughly 20,000 people -- a good majority of whom were out-of-towners -- poured onto the streets of Sanford in March 2012 protesting that neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, who shot Trayvon, remained free. The killing highlighted deep fissures in the community of roughly 56,000 people between whites and blacks, and the haves and have-nots, he said.

Smith said he spent two months walking the streets and talking to residents -- a practice he and Swoboda did regularly during Smith's 25 years with the Elgin Police Department.

"My goal was to have a discussion with them," Smith said. "We didn't have one arrest, no destruction of anything (during protests)."

A year later, 250 people showed up at Zimmerman's trial to protest when a jury found him not guilty of the charges on July 13, 2013.

Smith attributes the situation's de-escalation to his department's efforts working with local clergy, and young men and women in the community.

"The right time to build relationships is not right after an incident. It's much prior to (that)," said Aurora Police Chief Greg Thomas, whose department has conducted a series of community meetings prompted by recent shootings in town.

Thomas said the forums were a first step.

"We have nearly 30 neighborhood groups that meet and we discuss (issues) constantly," he said. "The real work is done by the front-line officers."

Recruiting and training the right kind of candidates for the job also is key, officials said.

Several years ago, the Aurora Police Department changed the way it recruits new officers by making applications available online, which increased the number of minority candidates who tested.

Meanwhile, the Elgin Police Department started recruiting nationally, going as far as Puerto Rico to hire officers. The department also is open to hiring military veterans, teachers, Boys and Girls Club mentors, and those who come through its own Explorer Program, Swoboda said.

"At the end of the day, what you want is the best candidate ... one who can bring empathy and is willing to learn," he said.