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Stressing diversity in law enforcement

By Gabriel Morgan

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As the nation commemorates the 50th anniversary of the historic March on Washington, I would like to share a few thoughts about why diversity is so vital to the success of law enforcement agencies nationwide. advertisement

I was raised in Brooklyn, New York. In my neighborhood back then, we didn't look on the cops with a whole lot of respect. They were mostly white and we had a few choice words for them.

But there was an African-American sergeant in our neighborhood who took me under his wing and encouraged me to consider a career in law enforcement. We trusted him, and he knew how essential it was to build trust in the people and community he served. He was able to do it better than most, because he looked like us, cared about us, and understood our community.

The law enforcement profession has advanced to new heights, but our best resources are our people in uniform and the people in our communities. Our communities today are more diverse than my neighborhood in Brooklyn. Having racially and ethnically diverse officers allows us to make meaningful connections to the people we serve.

I know from my experiences as a law enforcement leader that when people trust us, they are more likely to report quality-of-life issues, assist in informal crime prevention measures, and have a higher amount of respect for us and the work we do. This respect leads to greater safety for law enforcement officers and enables us to be more effective in preventing crime. The Fight Crime: Invest in Kids report entitled Racial Equity Strengthens Communities and Makes Police More Effective (www.fightcrime.org/racialequity), highlights these findings.

I often speak to fellow law enforcement officers about three key ways to build the kind of diversity that supports public safety.

- 1) Look to higher education institutions for top talent. That means actively recruiting young men and women from historically black colleges. This enables law enforcement agencies to bring in well-educated officers who are able to establish a greater sense of trust with the community.
- 2) Recognize the power of young minds and focus on youth development. Law enforcement agencies should support opportunities to connect with children. This helps break through the negative stigma often associated with a career in law enforcement. Through the Newport News Sheriff's Office Law Enforcement Explorer program, we're able to go into schools to talk with kids in small groups. The conversations can be amazing – we always feel like we've made progress in establishing rapport and trust. We must show at-risk kids that they have the power to dream and achieve greatness. We also work with the students in the An Achievable Dream schools. When the kids graduate, they say, "Look at me, I'm a dreamer!" They know they can count on us as part of their support system.
- 3) Help at-risk youth get on track for successful lives. Children living in poverty face so many difficulties that greatly inhibit their ability to grow into the kind of representatives we need. Investing in high-quality preschool will give more kids a foundation for academic success. As police officers, we must show America that our job is not just about locking people up. Keeping our communities safe starts very early on, by investing in our children.

These ideas enable all citizens to realize a great deal more of the dream articulated 50 years ago today: greater harmony in our diverse communities, and greater public safety for all.

Morgan is the sheriff of Newport News

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