

Police tackle problem of ‘implicit bias’

By Rod Watson | News Urban Affairs Editor | Google+

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David Zack recalls a cop talking about standing in a long checkout line delayed by a woman arguing with the cashier over a coupon. At one time, the officer would have been as steamed as the other customers.

But after training that helps police recognize the unconscious biases they – and everyone else – carry around, he realized the woman probably was just poor and needed to save every penny.

Zack, Cheektowaga’s police chief, recounts the story to drive home a key lesson, one especially important for police dealing with diverse populations: “Look at things through the eyes of the person you’re dealing with.”

His cop’s reaction is one indication the “implicit bias” training that Zack implemented can make a difference for officers who – confronted with sagging pants, foul attitudes and worse – often encounter people at their worst.

It’s also an example of what leadership and openness to new approaches can do in changing an organization’s culture, something vitally important as municipalities make training the first casualty of tight budgets. Zack credits town officials with sending him to conferences across the country – long before Ferguson, Mo., and Baltimore – to bring back best practices to an area that needs them.

It was at one of those conferences that he was “blown away” by Lorie Fridell’s training about implicit bias that, unlike other diversity sessions, didn’t cast blame, but simply got officers to acknowledge reality: We all have subconscious prejudices.

“But here’s the difference: You’re cops, and you have to recognize it when it occurs,” said Zack, who has been police chief since 2011.

Buffalo NAACP President Frank Mesiah was among community leaders Zack invited to sit in on part of the training. Mesiah, a former Buffalo cop who also taught college classes, recalls taking students to Fort Erie, Ont., to drive home the same point Fridell was making. Invariably, he said, the mixed-race pair or the long-haired “hippie” would get stopped at the bridge. “It wasn’t blaming the police. It was looking at their attitudes,” he said of Fridell’s take on overcoming such bias.

Bringing her in shows that Zack recognizes what many leaders won’t: Change starts at the top. He plans to share Fridell’s insights with the local and state police chiefs associations. “It’s agency culture. What does your agency tolerate?” Zack said, citing a law enforcement aphorism that “police culture will eat policy for lunch.”

“What it always boils down to is supervision and leadership,” he added, pointing to an effort over the last decade to make clear that poor behavior will affect assignments, promotions and pay. The results? A SUNY Buffalo State study shows that the percentage of arrests involving use of force has declined since new training began in 2011.

That hasn't stopped Cheektowaga from being among the suburbs that black motorists complain about. He acknowledges that his department aggressively enforces traffic laws. But after the U.S. Justice Department report on Ferguson revealed the virtual debtors' prison that traffic tickets create through fines, interest and penalties on poor people, he said he's even rethinking that – something he hadn't considered until hearing the ramifications laid out at a conference.

Done right, police work in diverse towns involves this kind of "constant learning curve." That includes helping officers learn more about themselves.

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