

Cheektowaga police wisely acting now to head off any potential racial bias on May 29, 2015 - 12:01 AM

Something important and hopeful is happening in Cheektowaga. Taking note of what is occurring in police departments around the country, accounting for the town's own racial history and recognizing the truth that all people develop biases, the Cheektowaga Police Department is providing training to officers with the intent of avoiding the disastrous problems that have played out in places like Baltimore, Cleveland, New York City and Ferguson, Mo.

Because of those events and others, police departments around the country are under pressure. Sometimes that has been because of generally poor relations between departments and citizens, especially minority populations. Often enough, it has been because of reckless and possibly illegal conduct by police officers and whole departments abusing the vast authority vested in them.

Change requires education, and given the undeniable fact that all humans develop biases based on their experiences and environments, it is especially critical for police officers to understand motivations that can lead them to make bad decisions. What is remarkable and encouraging is that Cheektowaga is taking the lead locally in acting to prevent the calamities that have occurred elsewhere around the country.

It's a wise move. Cheektowaga's police haven't been party to racially tinged crises such as occurred in Ferguson, Cleveland and elsewhere, but racial tensions exist. The death of Cynthia Wiggins almost 20 years ago remains a source of pain and suspicion. The 17-year-old African-American had to cross seven lanes of traffic on Walden Avenue to get to work at the Walden Galleria because city buses weren't allowed to stop on the mall property, even though other buses were granted that right. She was killed crossing the road.

Police weren't involved in that tragedy, but to the department's credit, it recognized that Wiggins' death has become part of the fabric of the town's existence. It's part of the reason that leaders are taking a proactive approach to race relations. It sent its entire 129-member department to a science-based training called "fair and impartial policing." To lead the training, it brought in Lorie Fridell, a national expert on the unconscious biases that influence policing. It was the first police department in New York to seek her out. It was, as Fridell said, "incredibly courageous" of the department to take that important step.

In Ferguson, a federal examination of the events that led up to the police shooting of Michael Brown concluded that the entire department operated in a way that disadvantaged minorities. That seems premeditated, but what about the officers in Staten Island who ganged up on Eric Garner for selling loose cigarettes? Garner died. Was the police response to Garner's low-level offense a consequence of unconscious bias?

What about the police officer in Cleveland who killed a 12-year-old boy in a city park? Tamir Rice had been pointing a toy gun at people and a police officer killed him before assessing the situation. What caused his response?

After that incident and many others, Cleveland has just agreed to make sweeping reforms in its troubled police department to create an organization that is more accountable and engaged with the people it serves.

All Americans could benefit from searching their own prejudices, but it is especially important for police to understand how their biases – unconscious or not – affect their decision making, given the potential for tragic consequences.

Police departments are fundamental to the safety of American communities, but that presupposes the departments are staffed by well-trained officers with strong leadership. Without that, a difficult job becomes nearly impossible as relations fray and people, including police officers, are at heightened risk of harm.

That's the dynamic that the Cheektowaga Police Department seems to understand. There's never any guarantee that training such as its officers received will be taken to heart and, indeed, periodic training is probably wise.

But the fact remains that the department took this step in advance of any problems that could potentially occur. That's leadership of which the town's citizens can be proud and that other police departments here should emulate.