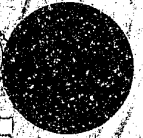


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Louis J. Freeh
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ACQUISITIONS

Focus on Community Services



Community Relations Service A Catalyst for Calm

By Timothy J. Johnson

Racial conflicts in communities can result in widespread violence and even death. Small incidents easily escalate into community-wide disturbances. In the wake of the Los Angeles riots in April 1992, community leaders and police administrators across the country renewed the search for

effective means to settle disputes and reduce racial tensions before they become violent confrontations. An often-overlooked resource available to communities, organizations, and individuals to help resolve such conflicts is the Community Relations Service (CRS), a component of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Origin and Mission

The 1964 Civil Rights Act¹ established the Community Relations Service and charged it with providing assistance to settle disputes that involve allegations of discriminatory practices throughout the United States. The CRS has 10 regional and 4 field offices located in major cities nationwide. Conciliation specialists in those offices aid civic leaders, police administrators, business executives, and school administrators in addressing race-related problems. They help organizations assess racial tension, perceptions of disparity, and problems related to discriminatory practices based on race, color, or national origin. These trained conciliation specialists provide an impartial presence in mediation and conciliation of conflicts. In addition, the CRS staff offers educational programs and materials that cover a range of related topics, including cultural awareness, community-oriented policing, and communication skills.

Requests for Assistance

The 1964 Civil Rights Act authorizes the CRS to offer assistance in two ways. First, in the reactive mode, CRS personnel respond to requests for assistance made by individuals or organizations. Second, based on awareness of a potential conflict, CRS staff may take the initiative to offer assistance. In both cases, the criterion used to determine if CRS will provide assistance is simply whether the conflict falls under the agency's jurisdiction, i.e., whether it involves allegations of discriminatory practices based on race, color, or national origin.

Conflicts addressed by CRS can be internal to a particular organization (public or private), municipal

department, or school system or involve allegations from outside the department or organization. CRS mediation often proves useful as an alternative to litigation or arrests. All casework is confidential in order to protect the integrity of the process and the neutrality of the mediators.

Because of the limited number of staff members (an average of only four per region), conflicts that impact the most people in a community tend to take precedence over less widespread problems. However, the agency does address issues on a smaller scale whenever possible.

Problem Assessment

CRS has developed a systematic way to evaluate racial tension in a community. The Distant Early Warning Signs (DEWS) system provides municipal leaders with 21 indicators for measuring tension in a community. The indicators include general media reports on discrimination or racial tension, major population shifts in a community, the number of interracial assaults, the extent of racial graffiti, and even projected weather conditions. (For example, a long, hot summer or particularly cold winter may exacerbate perceptions of a lack of city services.)

Distant Early Warning Signs (DEWS) System

Indicators Used to Assess the Potential for Racial Tension in a Community

- Increased disturbance calls in a particular district
- Number of interracial assaults
- Number of assaults on police
- Levels of police use of force
- Increased citizen complaints of excessive use of force
- Decreased levels of community involvement with local police department
- Presence of or increase in hate groups in the community
- Pending "big event" (opening of a controversial movie, a music concert, an athletic event, etc.)
- General media reports
- School-based incidents
- Increased racial graffiti
- Major population shifts
- Presence of a "hot" CRS case
- Weather conditions
- Crowding (housing shortages, lack of adequate school resources, etc.)
- General input from community leaders
- High levels of unemployment
- Changes in social service
- Demonstrations
- Presence of unresolved conflict
- Rationing of gas, food, water, etc.

CRS' 30 years of experience has shown that these indicators affect tension levels, which can lead to violence if left unchecked.

Using the DEWS model, community leaders decide which indicators are important to them, based on their unique and intimate knowledge of the community. Then, given the relative value that they place on the various indicators, the community leaders determine whether a conflict is at hand. If so, they can focus on resolving the specific issues using a variety of local resources. Local leaders make all decisions about their own situations; CRS staff members do not dictate the solutions but do provide guidance if requested. The DEWS system is available free upon request and can be used independently or with the assistance of CRS experts.

In addition, CRS has developed a method to assess community problems involving police-community relations. Designed for community leaders and law enforcement administrators, this program promotes community involvement, helps to develop problem recognition, and suggests some useful problem-solving tools.

A similar program has been developed to help school systems address issues affecting the students' learning environment. The Student Problem Identification/Resolution Program (SPIR) facilitates conflict resolution among student leaders, faculty, parents, and community representatives. It brings all groups together to prioritize issues and solutions and to create a general plan for addressing issues of racial tension and violence.

Training

CRS also provides training in several areas related to racial conflicts. Training programs can be as short as 1 hour or as long as a week, depending on the needs of the requestor. Usually directed to a particular audience as the result of a specific conflict, CRS training generally addresses certain key areas:

Racial tension assessment and reduction, conciliation and mediation, cultural awareness, and communication skills.

Specific training modules include community-oriented policing, conflict resolution, communication, use of force, cultural awareness, community involvement, crisis assessment/response, self-marshaling, contingency planning, and rumor control. In addition to on-site instruction provided by CRS staff, the agency also provides free guides upon request that allow groups to conduct their own training.

Case Study

CRS assistance can take many forms, depending on the specific situation. While all CRS cases are confidential, what follows is an example of the type of mediation and conciliation services provided to communities when problems arise.

At a local bar, an armed, off-duty police officer observed several Hispanic patrons arguing loudly over that day's soccer game and told members of the group to lower their voices. After leaving the bar, the police officer

saw some of the men involved in a fistfight. In breaking up the fight, the officer shot and killed one man and critically wounded the man's brother.

The Hispanic community became enraged over the incident, which was interpreted as the last straw in a long series of police brutality toward the community. Two nights of rioting ensued.

CRS quickly deployed staff members to the city. They contacted several levels of leadership from the Hispanic community—ranging from street leaders to leaders of major Hispanic community organizations—and local authorities, including the mayor, city council, police administrators, and the prosecuting attorney. CRS conciliation specialists facilitated meetings among the Hispanic leadership to help them articulate the steps necessary to end the riots. Similar meetings with municipal authorities produced a comparable list.

“
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With CRS mediation, an agreement was reached that stopped the violence. The prosecuting attorney agreed to address the case expeditiously; the police department agreed to conduct meetings with the community to discuss police-community relations; and the CRS agreed to provide cultural awareness training for the police department. The community and the police department also created a police-community advisory board, which meets monthly to discuss and attempt to resolve issues before they lead to racial tension and violence.

Conclusion

The CRS helps communities cope with changing patterns of racial and ethnic relations. Communities experiencing race-related problems need not face them alone. Skilled mediators and conciliation specialists are available to lend a hand. Education on cultural awareness and conflict resolution can help soothe racial tensions before they become community-wide conflicts. The calming influence of the Community Relations Service could mean the difference between violent confrontations and peaceful solutions. ♦

Endnote

1964 Civil Rights Act, Title X, 42USC, Section 2000g.

Mr. Johnson is a Program Specialist with the U.S. Department of Justice, Community Relations Service, in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service Offices

CRS HEADQUARTERS

Phone: 301-492-5808
Fax: 301-492-5704

Regional Offices

Region I: New England
(CT, ME, MA,
NH, RI, VT)
Phone: 617-424-5715
Fax: 617-424-5727

Region II: Northeast
(NY, NJ, Puerto Rico,
Virgin Islands)
Phone: 212-264-0700
Fax: 212-264-2143

Region III: Mid-Atlantic
(PA, DE, WV,
VA, MD, DC)
Phone: 215-597-2344
Fax: 215-597-9148

Region IV: Southeast
(AL, FL, GA, MS,
NC, SC, TN, KY)
Phone: 404-331-6883
Fax: 404-331-4471

Region V: Midwest
(IL, IN, MI,
MN, OH, WI)
Phone: 312-353-4391
Fax: 312-353-4390

Region VI: Southwest
(AR, LA, NM, OK, TX)
Phone: 214-655-8175
Fax: 214-655-8184

Region VII: Central
(IA, KS, MO, NE)
Phone: 816-426-2022
Fax: 816-426-7512

Region VIII: Rocky Mountains
(CO, MT, ND, SD, WY, UT)
Phone: 303-844-2973
Fax: 303-844-2907

Region IX: Western
(CA, AZ, Guam, HI, NV)
Phone: 415-744-6565
Fax: 415-744-6590

Region X: Northwest
(AK, ID, OR, WA)
Phone: 206-220-6700
Fax: 206-220-6706

Field Offices

Miami Field Office
Phone: 305-536-4262
Fax: 305-536-7363

Detroit Field Office
Phone: 313-226-4010
Fax: 313-226-2568

Houston Field Office
Phone: 713-229-2861
Fax: 713-229-2862

Los Angeles Office
Phone: 213-894-2941
Fax: 213-894-2880