Easing Tensions between police and minorities

by Dr. Carl S. Taylor

As noted, the relationship between minority groups and police in the United States has historically been strained. If we look at the past, we can see that there is no warm tradition of community cooperation between the African-American community and law enforcement. Some cities have a deep and bitter history of bias and prejudice interwoven in their past relationships. Racial polarization in our major cities has often cast the police as the oppressors, and some cities have an unfortunate tradition of hiring outsiders and few minorities, which has fueled further resentment toward the police. The feeling in many communities today is that the system pits law enforcement as an occupying army versus the neighborhood. If there is any good news in the current situation, it is that the history of this strain has found the 1990's ripe for change, and Community Policing is a pivotal opportunity to bring the two sides together.

Ronald Hampton, the director of national affairs for the National Black Police Association, spoke of the historical relationship during a recent interview: "The reason Community Policing is still settling in the black community at a much slower rate than some other communities is that, beforehand, there was no positive foundation to build on, unlike other communities. The fact is most black neighborhoods had justifiable grounds for not feeling relaxed or comfortable with the police."

In its daily activity, Community Policing embraces the community, by assisting neighborhoods in their vested existence, by working to improve the overall quality of life. Cities where officials engage in hard-line rhetoric and where they spend their limited resources on war-like equipment such as tanks, weapons, riot gear, and tear gas are sending a signal that the black community resents.

The general public's feeling that minorities tolerate or condone crime and disorder is one of the great myths of our time. Tim Mitchell, a research investigator in Detroit, talked of survey findings from his 12 years of working with urban youth gangs. "The residents are conservative in terms of crime. In fact, they want stiff penalties on the criminals. These citizens are no different than any others in the Greater Detroit area. Perhaps they might actually want more acute retributions, but they certainly don't tolerate crime or like it."
Community Policing today means that police officers are working in neighborhoods whose problems are vastly different than in the past. When we think of foot patrol, we think of Officer O'Grady in the early industrial days of Detroit or Cleveland, but those officers never had to confront problems like crack or semi-automatic weapons in the hands of children. The world today is moving much faster and is much more complicated than the one that the police faced in the past. In addition to guns and drugs, there are tough social and economic issues, such as extreme poverty and high dropout rates in schools. A Community Officer faced with a problem such as high unemployment among minority teens might find that the solution requires involving individuals and groups from the business community. The fact is that a Community Officer must wear different hats, and this can help to humanize their role, by requiring them to reach out to a broad coalition. Community Policing allows the police to build a relationship based on positives rather than negatives.