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The role of local law enforcement officers has evolved significantly over the past ten years. We have been tasked with ever increasing responsibilities, especially in our homeland security role, without relinquishing our traditional duty of providing for public peace and order. We as a profession have achieved numerous significant accomplishments in spite of continuing economic pressure and decreasing staffing levels. Domestic terrorist plots have been thwarted through attentive actions. Cities across the nation have seen crime numbers steadily decline, especially violent crime. Salt Lake City, for example, during 2010 realized a twenty-five year low in part-one crime. I am frequently asked for the reasons driving this decrease which seems counterintuitive in the face of recession.

Public order and community well-being are the responsibility of every citizen in the neighborhoods we serve. There was a point in history, however, in which the public relied upon and expected law enforcement to address disorder and criminal activity. In fact, people accepted the notion that the police knew best and rarely questioned the means of investigations if they resulted in the incarceration of criminals.

Police events transpired which called in to question the integrity and professionalism of agencies throughout the United States. The public demanded increased oversight, input and accountability. Civilian review boards emerged, neighborhood watch and community partnerships expanded. Community policing became not only standard practice but an expectation. Citizen involvement and partnership places emphasis upon relationships, and responsibility for public peace upon all participants.

While many factors certainly contribute to the steady decline of criminal behavior, we, in law enforcement, have become better partners and more effective stewards of public trust. We function best when we stand as part of, not apart from the community. In order to continue in a successful and productive direction, public trust and confidence in law enforcement must be safeguarded and nurtured.

The threat of terrorism combined with substantial technological advancements and enhanced community participation has created an environment in which law enforcement is capable of collecting, retaining and disseminating information in greater volume than ever before. Personal information concerning a suspicious individual in Salt Lake City can be shared with agencies within the region or across the Country in minutes. While this increases our capability to apprehend and interdict criminals, additionally it should accentuate the need for transparency, national standards and oversight.

The goal of effective policing is to ensure public safety and minimize the impact of disorder by preventing criminal activity, not merely responding for documentation after the fact. To accomplish this necessitates contact based upon the Supreme Court established standard of reasonable suspicion. This standard, ingrained within police recruits, requires officers to develop articulable facts suggesting criminal activity prior to conducting an investigative stop. Race, ethnicity and religion cannot be utilized as factors to create suspicion. Allowing bias to influence enforcement actions erodes public trust and creates detrimental case law.

Improved hiring practices, effective training and administrative accountability have helped minimize officer bias in police generated encounters. A significant number of police contacts, however, are dictated through citizen calls for service and inherently adopt the bias of the reporting individual. For example, frequently in areas troubled by gang activity, people will report groups of minority juveniles dressed in sports attire as gang members. Unfortunately, from the moment we receive that call a certain amount of bias is interjected. We do not have the ability to second guess the caller or refuse to respond, what if in fact they are correct and this group poses a threat to public safety. And, if the description is accurate, for officer safety reasons, we cannot send a single officer. Violent gang members have a propensity to carry weapons, so we send a minimum of two units. If the suspicions of the caller are incorrect, the perceptions of the community are the police are being heavy handed and targeting minority youth, and we have yet to take any police action other than responding.

It is imperative that we remain mindful of the tremendous burden facing our law enforcement officers as they strive to protect the communities in which we reside. Considerable responsibility should accompany any expansion of police authority. I hold officers to an extremely high standard of conduct. The laws and legislation regulating their actions should receive no less attention.

We must never allow this or any other piece of legislation to be interpreted as lowering the traditional standards of qualified immunity. Law enforcement as a profession will suffer if granted immunity for taking actions that ignore clearly established law, constitutional rights of individuals and legal standards of probable cause and reasonable suspicion.