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ORANGE COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

Building Police Trust

In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, there is a newfound respect and admiration for the bravery, dedication and selfless service of our nation's police officers. In Orange County, and other communities across the nation where the community-oriented policing approach is used, residents for years have seen how dedicated police are, not only in emergencies and disasters but in their everyday contacts.

Police and residents didn't always have the close working relationship stressed in the more enlightened approach to law enforcement. Not too many years ago, officers in Orange County generally rode around on patrol and responded to calls—rarely getting out of their cars to meet people on the street.

When police realized how much that approach was distancing officers from the public, especially in minority areas, and how much the degree of trust people had in their police had eroded, the "partnership" approach between police and community grew.

Crime rates locally began to decrease, with officers back into the community dealing with issues in the neighborhoods in their early stages, before they became major problems.

To help promote that approach, and recognize the more outstanding police efforts, the Orange County Human Relations Commission seven years ago established its Community-Oriented Policing Awards.

Garden Grove police, who patrol a community with nearly 100 places of worship, the most of any city in the county, were recognized this year for the department's Interfaith Volunteer and Chaplain program.

Once only white and Christian, the chaplain service has been restructured to mirror the diversity of the city. The city's police chaplains, a volunteer force from religious communities, now represent the Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Mormon and Islamic faiths.

The change is significant. It helps residents when the chaplains are in the field on calls with police and it helps broaden officers' understanding of the many cultures and religious faiths they come into contact with.

Diversity was also part of the program cited in Huntington Beach, where police work with formerly battered women to provide a round-the-clock intervention and support program in 40 languages to victims of domestic violence.

The Orange Police Department's new Youth Service's Bureau was recognized for its work to divert youths from crime and gangs and Santa Ana police for their special team formed to drive out gang activity in one of the city's highest crime areas. The operation reduced crime by nearly 30%, united the community and built better trust and communications between police and residents.

The Sheriff's Department was also singled out for its San Clemente High School Grad Night program to reduce the drinking and driving and resultant traffic accidents that are the leading cause of death of young people ages 16 to 20.

The recognition given police is well deserved. And it's a reminder to residents of how much more the county's police officers do—especially when they get out of their cars and into the community.