

ENGLISH only



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session II: Countering Stereotypes and Prejudice in Public Discourse

As prepared for delivery by Ms. Sharee Freeman,
Director of Community Relations Service, U.S. Dept. of Justice
to the OSCE Meeting on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and
Inter-Ethnic Understanding, Almaty Kazakhstan
June 12, 2006

Good afternoon. Again, it is a pleasure to be with you today. I would like to talk briefly about how to effectively counter stereotypes and prejudices in public discourse, using the activities of the Community Relations Service of the U.S. Department of Justice (CRS) as an illustration of what I have found to be effective in this arena.

I. Coordinating with the Media

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, CRS worked with community groups and media to aid in the development and promulgation of public service announcements designed to combat attacks against innocent people of a particular religious or ethnic group. These announcements were specifically designed to counter the negative stereotypes that some in the U.S. had of Arab, Muslim and Sikhs after 9/11. The Attorney General recorded a public service announcement to promote tolerance and to discourage ethnic and religion-based motivated harassment and crime against members of the Arab, Muslim and Sikh communities.

These service announcements were instrumental in raising community awareness on a national level about Arab, Muslim and Sikh community members and educating people about tolerance.

The U.S. Government worked to shift public discourse to prevent racial violence, all were instructed, and did, work with government officials on a national, state and local level to promote a uniform message of tolerance, acceptance and understanding. CRS urged local law enforcement, public officials, and clergy to make public statements that called for moderation and restraint, cautioned against misdirected behavior toward fellow citizens and pledged vigorous prosecution of any attacks against individuals or groups based on race, color, and national origin. These coordinated messages helped immensely in this effort and provided a model for local community leaders.

As government is so often in the forefront of public discourse, simply ensuring that the government is espousing a uniform message will shift public discourse from a negative "if it bleeds, it leads" concept to a more positive perception.

Encourage officials to craft their language in such a way that it promotes tolerance and diversity. Craft their sound bites to be played to the larger national population to promote tolerance, respect and understanding.

II. Educating the Media

One of CRS' partner groups realized that one of the biggest issues preventing media and press representatives from accurately portraying those from different backgrounds is a lack of education. Many times reporters are not purposefully portraying persons from particular ethnic or religious groups in a negative light; rather, they simply lack the cultural education necessary to portray them in a neutral or positive light. The answer to this lies in the development and implementation of seminars designed specifically for reporters and other media representatives to educate them on specific cultural and religious issues.

CRS has historically worked with communities of color to facilitate relationships with media. In the 1970s, CRS brought together African American communities and media to develop a relationship and facilitate understanding. CRS worked with the Hispanic American community to change the stereotypes that were inadvertently perpetuated in the media.

CRS has also developed programs that work to educate the media and other members of the community about Arab, Muslim and Sikh communities in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. As part of the CRS Training of the Trainer sessions (TOTs) for the Arab, Muslim and Sikh Cultural Awareness Seminar, CRS invites local media, including reporters and photographers to be a part of the seminar.

These TOT seminars are conducted in areas across the country where there have been hate crime incidents or there are significant numbers of Arab, Muslim and Sikh community members. In this way, CRS has developed a network of local Arab, Muslim and Sikh contacts in communities on a national level. The strategic location of the seminars allows the greatest number of people from the widest variety of locations and backgrounds to attend. The seminars are like a pebble in a still pool of water. The development of cultural competency extends out from the location; the pebble, and affects a larger area in the surrounding community; the pool.

As part of these seminars, CRS developed a roll call video, "The First Three to Five Seconds," for police training. This CRS-created video has also been distributed by the Department of Homeland Security, under their seal. As a result, this video has been circulated throughout the United States. CRS also printed thousands of copies of this video and distributed it to the press and law enforcement.

Reporters are often invited and take part in the training, thus increasing their awareness of these minority groups, and to take pictures and produce articles about the program. This serves multiple purposes. First, it educates the media themselves. Second, often media participation in one of our seminars will lead to a story in the newspaper about the program itself. This creates an opportunity for positive press.

CRS engages in "rumor control." This is the promotion of clear, correct information, designed to combat rumors that may spring up after a racially motivated incident has occurred. Rumor control involves establishing a center and publicizing a telephone number or hotline number and contact information for those who have questions about the incident. This allows community members to call and obtain accurate, non-biased and tension-dispelling information. A secondary effect of establishing a contact such as this is to facilitate the distribution of correct information to the media and provide a resource for them. Get accurate and timely news out to the public. Debunk the stereotype myth. This can serve to dispel tensions very quickly in a community that is teetering on the edge of a riot, an explosion into violence.

III. Working with Youth

Beyond simply educating the community at large, there is a need to educate students and youth about cultural and racial diversity and understanding. It is only through educating those that are going to be tomorrow's leaders that we will be able to change communities to be more accepting of people of diverse religions, ethnicities and backgrounds.

Students respond to messages from teachers, to those in positions of leadership, and to their peers. Teach tolerance as a part of the curriculum if at all possible. If that is not possible, then programs like CRS' School SPIRIT program may be effective.

The SPIRIT program – Student Problem Identifying and Resolving Issues Together – was designed by CRS as a method of bringing students from a variety of backgrounds, who are in conflict with each other together to work out their differences. SPIRIT brings together students, administrators, teachers, and parents to identify issues that are perpetuating conflict and develop solutions. As part of the program, school staff identifies student leaders to help guide the program. Since its inception SPIRIT has been conducted in hundreds of schools across the country, and has been integral in preventing violence and conflict in areas with changing demographic populations. This program helps to counter stereotypes by allowing groups of students who do not normally interact to work together to achieve change in their school communities.

Another way that CRS works with teachers and administrators to counter stereotypes is through a program called Assessment of Tension Breeding Factors. This program helps school officials determine the type and extent of problems that may exist in their school. This is a racial-needs assessment, and serves to measure the racial/ethnic stress factors in a school that merit attention for improvement. Some of the questions this program asks are:

- Are students exposed to a balanced, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural curriculum?
- Are teachers trained to discuss racial/ethnic issues, and do they encourage minority and non-minority students to work together?
- Are both minority and non-minority parents actively encouraged to participate in school activities?
- Are minority and non-minority students and parents active in monitoring and ensuring school rules and disciplinary procedures?
- Have there been any racial/ethnic incidents this year and is there a contingency plan should one occur?
- Does the staff reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body?
- Is there a student group responsible for helping the school community deal effectively with racial/ethnic concerns?
- Are minority and non-minority students proportionately represented in all curriculum tracks, classes, and extracurricular activities?

Thank you again for allowing me to share with you ideas and programs that we have found to be successful. As we share ideas and concepts, remember what United States President Gerald Ford said, "Times of change are times of challenge. It is estimated that by 2030, 40 percent of all Americans will belong to various racial minorities. Already the global economy requires unprecedented grasp of diverse viewpoints and cultural traditions...If history has taught us anything in this remarkable century, it is the notion of America as a work in progress." Thank you.