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Columbia Heights police change approaches with changing cultures



Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

Jose Luis Bandera took a break outside his store, Cuernavaca, along Central Avenue in Columbia Heights. The store got its name from a city in Mexico.

Columbia Heights has long been a melting pot. As the city becomes even more diverse, the police are hoping to break down cultural and language barriers.

By **PAUL LEVY**, Star Tribune

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Al Kordiak, the former chairman of the Anoka County board and a legendary figure in Columbia Heights, was asked last year about his city's changing ethnic neighborhoods: "This city has always been a melting pot," Kordiak explained.

"The ethnic groups change, but the city doesn't. We've always opened our arms to immigrants."

Anoka County's most culturally diverse city wants to do more than simply welcome immigrants. The city's police department and school district have partnered with the county and the 10th judicial district to develop an initiative to help Columbia Heights' newest residents better understand the community.

In October, representatives of the police department met with a Hispanic church congregation to ease any fear or discomfort the residents may have felt toward authorities. Another meeting was scheduled last Saturday. In addition to Police Chief Scott Nadeau and Capt. Lenny Austin, who helps oversee the police department's diversity efforts, the department has a community police coordinator, Terry Nightingale, who says his primary job is "connecting with the community."

Austin called the initial meeting "a nice opportunity to open dialogue about concerns relating to police. About 25 members of the congregation attended, he said.

The focus of these meetings -- how to react if pulled over by the police -- might seem routine to some people but are genuine concerns for new immigrants, Nadeau said.

City officials also hope to benefit from these meetings, which will likely be extended and offered to the city's growing Somali community, Nadeau said. The new outreach program may help police to better

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understand new residents who must overcome language and cultural differences and may consider democracy as foreign as lefse.

"Understanding is a two-way street," said Nadeau. "Our ability to connect with the community is different than five years ago."

A drive down Central Avenue reflects those changes. Markets and restaurants boast Asian, Hispanic, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern roots. Once a haven for immigrants from eastern Europe, Columbia Heights' neighborhoods are now a United Nations in which one-third of the citizens are white, one-third Hispanic and the rest a vibrant rainbow mixture, according to the police department and school district.

Columbia Heights' affordable housing and acceptance of various faith communities has long made the city of just under 20,000 a community in steady transition.

"We value other people's customs," Nadeau said. "They, in turn, want a place where they feel valued and accepted."

"We want to embrace diversity."

Other communities do the same, but in smaller ways, said Andre Koen, Anoka County's cultural coordinator.

"Columbia Heights, in some ways, is the tail that wags the dog," Koen said. "What happens in Columbia

Heights foretells what will happen in Ramsey, Anoka, Fridley and Coon Rapids.

'Rumors and speculation'

"Quite a few refugees come from a whole different paradigm," Koen said. "The way they perceive the police department is different. Rumors and speculation aren't always based in truth."

Many of Columbia Heights' new residents are also new to America, Nadeau said. "They come from places where police are corrupt. We want to dispel misconceptions by creating a healthy dialogue."

Those dialogues may be held in multiple languages.

Nicole Halabi, director of student services for the Columbia Heights School District, says about one-third of the district's nearly 3,000 students are Hispanic. Many parents call the district weekly, at the least, just trying to figure out how the schools operate.

"At one point we all were immigrants," she said. "We all had language barriers."

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