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NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT LAUNCHES NEW PUBLIC RELATION POLICY

Cedric Larson

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Police systems of America, always alert to adopt the latest scientific discovery in criminology to track down and apprehend perpetrators of crimes, have, strangely enough, more often than not had a blind spot when it came to the matter of a progressive public relations policy. The writer has looked through many standard text-books and compendious works on the subject of police science, training for law enforcement work, and criminology. In the majority of them the matter of a good, realistic public relations policy has been lost sight of completely, and passing mention made in a few cases. Criminologists and responsible police officials alike would do well to pay increased attention to the role of public relations in the war on crime, and not leave this important weapon in the fight against society's enemies to chance or to haphazard methods.

The Police Department of the City of New York has already had salutary results in setting up a positive public relations program to be followed by all members of the force from the Commissioner on down to the "rookie" on his first beat. Credit for this innovation in New York police work goes to Commissioner William P. O'Brien, who assumed the commissionership March 1, 1949, after 33 years of service with the Department. One of the first things that he did after assuming his new post was to launch this new public relations policy. Already, within a year-and-a-half of its inception, we can see concrete results.

Before beginning a discussion of the public relations program itself, for the benefit of those readers who may not be familiar with the world's largest municipal police system, we will make a rapid review of its scope and extent.

The headquarters of the New York Police Department is an unostentatious greystone five-story building which dates from 1905, in the midst of Manhattan's lower East side, a few blocks north of the civic center. It is hemmed in on every side by countless retail outlets for the precision steel industry, and a tourist to New York would scarcely give headquarters a second glance. Yet this building might be described as the nerve center of the metropolis. From his offices on the second floor,

Commissioner O'Brien and his six deputy commissioners direct the far-flung activities of almost 20,000 individuals on the force, who day and night guard the safety and property of almost eight million people, at an annual cost of about \$80 million.

From headquarters, the Police Commissioner commands the biggest law enforcement body in the world. In his department is an army of policemen, policewomen, and plainclothes detectives; a swift fleet of two-way radio cars; besides motorcycle squads, a flotilla of marine launches, an aviation unit with two amphibious planes, one land plane, and three helicopters, and emergency team equipped with the latest scientific devices to wage war on crime or aid those in distress. A maze of communications media, such as teletype, radio, telegraph, and telephone, provide instantaneous communication with all parts of the city, state, and nation.

Commissioner William P. O'Brien became the 21st Police Commissioner of the New York City Police Department following his appointment on February 17, 1949, by Mayor William O'Dwyer to succeed Commissioner Arthur W. Wallander.¹ He assumed office on March 1, 1949. The new Commissioner, like his predecessor, is a career man in the Department. His record of service has been exceptional, starting with two arrests made while still a "rookie" in training at the Police Academy. As an Assistant Chief Inspector on the West Side of Manhattan, he conducted the investigation which brought about the smashing of the infamous "football fix" case, in which a gambling ring attempted to bribe two members of a professional football team.

Under the New York City charter, the Police Commissioner is appointed by the mayor for a term of five years, at a salary of \$15,000 per annum, and removable either by the mayor or the governor. He is chargeable with and responsible for the execution of all laws, as well as the rules and regulations of the Department. He is the chairman of the board of trustees of the police pension fund which is empowered to retire and grant pensions to members of the police force, their widows, and dependents as prescribed by law. He may not hold any other public office, or if nominated to any elective office he must decline within ten days. The police commissioner is also a member, ex-officio, of the parole commission.

The city charter provides for six deputy commissioners. But the police commissioner is in complete control of the government, administration, disposition, and discipline of the Police Department and its

1. Since this article has gone to press Commissioner O'Brien has resigned as New York Police Commissioner. (Ed.)

entire force. He approves all official action of the Department and coordinates the work of the Police Department with all other municipal departments, as well as state and federal establishments.

The territory within the police jurisdiction of the city is divided into boroughs, each borough in command of an assistant, or a Deputy Chief Inspector. The territory within a borough is divided into patrol divisions, each commanded by an Inspector, and these in turn are divided into patrol precincts, each commanded by a captain or commanding officer assigned. The territory within a precinct is divided into posts. Posts are patrolled at all times of the day and night by uniformed patrolmen under the supervision of sergeants.

Patrol service is performed primarily by the foot patrolmen, who work under a three-platoon system for three tours of duty of eight hours each, around the clock. In general, slightly less than one-third of the force is on duty during each tour. The foot patrol is supplemented by radio motor patrol performed by uniformed and detective members of the department, motor patrol (not radio equipped), and by motorcycle and mounted patrol.

Each patrol precinct is divided into a number of sectors, depending upon the number of radio cars assigned. There are 232 radio motor patrol sectors in the city, each sector patrolled on all tours by two uniformed patrolmen in a radio car and also 17 detective cruiser radio motor patrol cars, each manned by four detectives, on patrol throughout the city.

In case of an accident or crime, one or more cars are sent to the scene, depending upon the nature of the case. As the City of New York covers an area of 320 square miles, has 5600 miles of streets, 29,857 street intersections, and 578 miles of water-front, the Department maintains approximately 740 automobiles equipped with two-way radio to operate in that area, and cars dispatched will arrive almost instantly. Twelve of the Department launches of the harbor precinct, and six of the aviation bureau airplanes (including three new helicopters) are also equipped with two-way radio receivers.

Space forbids going into the work of some of the well-known bureaus of the Department, and they can only be listed: The Safety Bureau, the Legal Bureau, Missing Persons Bureau, Criminal Identification Bureau, the famed "Rogues' Gallery," the Technical Research Laboratory, Traffic Division, Medical and Surgical Bureau, Bureau of Criminal Information, and the Police Academy. A Bureau of Planning and Operations, established in 1947, coordinates police activities with other city departments and agencies for the most effective utilization of man-

power, specialized personnel, and equipment dealing with unusual situations, such as a snowstorm or a fuel shortage.

This in bare outline is the New York Police Department of 1950, a far cry from the Dutch rule in 1650 when the solid citizens formed the night watch—when the Schouts patiently made their rounds throughout the night with staff, hand-lamp, bells, and hour-glass for proclaiming the time at street-corners.

We may now proceed with an examination of the new public relations policy, and how it enhances the all-embracing work of the Police Department, which reaches from the highest level of municipal police activity into the back-alleys of Harlem.

The annual report of the Police Department for 1949, published in May of this year, provides some highlights of the work of the Bureau of Public Relations, which furnishes us with a clue as to the extent of its activity. The work of this Bureau forms an important part of the overall public relations policy of Commissioner O'Brien. This Bureau keeps pace with the increasing activities of the many news agencies, including radio and television, which center in New York City, and handles the release of hundreds of items of police news to the press.

About 6200 requests by telephone and more than 2000 written communications seeking information on police activities and police procedure were received and acted upon by the Bureau in 1949. In cooperation with the Department of Commerce, City of New York, the Bureau assisted in facilitating the operations of motion picture companies in connection with 136 productions. Similar cooperation was extended to television companies in 161 cases.

During 1949, the Public Relations Bureau, investigated 6564 applications for press credentials. Of this number, 1391 applicants were issued police identification cards, 2379 working press cards, and 210 press photographer's vehicle cards. It was necessary to reject 2584 applicants as lacking in qualifications for the issuance of these cards.

The sports section of the Public Relations Bureau maintained direct contact with the Metropolitan Association AAU in advancing the athletic and sports program of the Police Sports Association of this Department. During the year, teams of the Police Sports Association maintained a leading position among amateur athletic clubs and colleges in the metropolitan district. Police athletes were most successful in baseball, basketball, handball, track and field, boxing, wrestling, diving, swimming, bicycling, pistol shooting, tug-of-war, and horsemanship. They won several AAU championships and played a prominent part in the outstanding meets, such as the Millrose Games, Knights of Columbus,

New York Athletic Club, and AAU Track and Field Championships. The Police Sports Association won the major portion of the awards in the various sports conducted by Mayor O'Dwyer's Committee on Municipal Athletics.

The Public Relations Bureau, it might be stated here, was established in the Secretary's Office in 1947, and charged with establishing better relations with the public and the press. Mr. Frank D. Doyle is the public relations officer, and is assisted in this work by Acting Captain William A. Lawrence.

Working closely with the Public Relations Bureau are between 30 and 40 working reporters who represent the eight or ten leading New York dailies and the press associations. Their office is in a building behind police headquarters, at 4 Centre Market Place, familiarly known to all as "The Shack." They have a direct line to the Public Relations Bureau, and when important spot news comes in, they are immediately notified. Reporters from "The Shack" cover the daily police "line-up," cover news conferences with the Commissioner and similar events. There is a short-wave radio at "The Shack" tuned to the police wave length so they get instantaneous leads for murders, burglaries, riots, or in short, any catastrophe wherein the Department flashes the radio patrol cars constantly cruising throughout the metropolis.

Reporters at "The Shack" have a series of telephone street-address books, so they can call persons in the vicinity of a crime or catastrophe and get eye-witness accounts of events, besides the statements of the police officers or other police officials. The reporters make it their policy to maintain good relations throughout the police echelons, so when perhaps a spectacular arrest is made they may be tipped off where to get a good story.

About three years ago a city-wide organization was formed called the New York Newspaper Reporters Association, with 400 or more members today. It is composed chiefly of reporters who work predominantly with the police. This Association strives to maintain a high plane of professional ethics on the part of its members and cooperate with the Police. Periodically, it has sponsored dinners with the Commissioner and Mayor present, and seeks in numerous other ways to foster mutual good will and understanding.

The Commissioner has an Advisory Committee on Press Cards composed of such men as the city editors of the New York dailies who pass on such matters as candidates recommended to receive press cards of a certain type, and the like.

The Police Department maintains close relations with the municipal radio station WNYC and notifies it of all important news events—particularly about such things as traffic tie-ups, or similar matters of public concern. Like notifications of important events go to other major radio outlets, to television studios, newsreel companies, and press agencies.

With the foregoing framework of public relations of the Department in mind, we may now turn to an examination of the new public relations policy of Commissioner O'Brien.

To begin with, in the opinion of the Commissioner, every member of the police force of the city, is not only a guardian of law and order on the beat or patrol level, but just as important, is also the key individual in building up good public relations between the public and the Department. In other words, the patrolman is the chief link between the Department and the public in public relations at the working level.

In October, 1949, Commissioner O'Brien issued a revised Department Manual of Procedure, Article 29 of which, comprising many pages, is devoted to "Public Relations." "Public relations, insofar as it relates to the Police Department," the Commissioner wrote in this Manual, "is the sum total of the attitudes, impressions, and opinions of the public in its relationship with the Department."

Amplifying the purpose of the public relations factor, he went on to say: "The mutual advantages of a friendly relationship between the people of a community and their police force should be widely understood and more fully appreciated. The success of a police force in the performance of its duties is largely measured by the degree of support and cooperation it receives from the people whom it serves. It is of paramount importance, therefore, to secure for this Department the confidence, respect, and approbation of the public. The cultivation of such desirable attitudes on the part of the public is dependent upon reciprocal attitudes on the part of this Department. In accordance with this concept of mutual good will, a program to enhance good public relations is designed for active participation therein by every member of the Department."

Commissioner O'Brien finds that there are four principal factors involved in determining relationships between the Police Department and the public, which are:

1. The Police—their attitude toward the people of the community, and their deportment and efficiency in the performance of their duties.

2. The Public—the attitude of the people toward their police force and law enforcement in general.
3. Racial and religious attitudes.
4. The press and publicity.

We may now proceed to examine each of these four elements.

Under the first heading, with reference to the police themselves, the Commissioner holds that "the most important factor in gaining the good will and confidence of the people is in fostering among members of the Department an attitude of courtesy and good will toward the people with whom they come in daily contact."

The members of the force are urged to provide the type of police service which the people expect from it. To gain public esteem, each member of the force is expected to develop such qualities as self-discipline, self-confidence, courtesy, patience, and tact.

"The judicious policeman most correctly reflects the policy of the Department," says the Commissioner. "To transients and visitors he is the public representative of the city. His demeanor and deportment in dealing with the public create impressions either favorable or unfavorable to himself, the Department, and frequently to the city.

"A policeman must not fail to realize that he is the cynosure of the public eye, and a ready subject of discussion. His merits and demerits are matters of interest not only to those he has direct dealings with, but also to the public generally. This is so because his official duties are closely related to practically every phase of community life."

Every policeman should strive to train himself to habits of acceptable conduct that will merit public approval. For example, the courage he displays in an emergency or time of grave danger, or his calmness at a scene of turbulent disorder, will evoke instant admiration. His sympathetic interest in looking after the aged, infirm, the injured, or watching out for children creates genuine affection. The inquiring tourist, or a visiting motorist who has unwittingly committed a minor traffic violation usually feels grateful for courteous explanations, and firmness in effecting arrests with no use of unnecessary force or show of feeling will merit the respect even of the offender himself.

The next element in the four is the public itself, comprised chiefly of peaceful, hard-working, law-abiding people, with the criminal element constituting only a small fraction of the population. While law enforcement of the many regulations is essential to guarantee the safety, health, comfort, and convenience of all the population of the city, violations of these regulations is not proof of criminal tendencies, and enforcement ordinarily should be sought along educational and cooperative lines.

Handling crowds is an extremely complex problem with which New York policemen come into almost daily contact. Events such as parades, public meetings, celebrations, sports events, picketing, public beaches, and band concerts require expert handling. Although elaborate plans must sometimes be drawn up to handle the multiple factors faced where throngs congregate, the Commissioner believes that the most important factor is to obtain the cooperation of the crowd itself. This is best achieved by persuasive methods. "A suggestion will usually prove more effective than an order," says Mr. O'Brien, "for while the average individual or group will promptly resent a domineering attitude on the part of a policeman, and will be quick to assert constitutional rights, the same individual or group will readily comply with a courteous request."

Today people naturally look to their police force for security of their person, homes, and property. Rendering first aid, performing rescues, administering relief in distress, and the like, are now routine police duty. "Since modern concepts of social police service today includes not only recreational and rehabilitative programs for youth and highway safety programs, but also active participation during emergencies involving disease epidemic, fuel shortages, or similar contingencies," says the Commissioner, "it is more a matter of necessity than of policy that a modern police department keep abreast of the progress in science, invention, and social concepts in providing an ever increasing measure of service and protection."

Since all kinds of organized groups interested in the welfare of the community can render important assistance to the police, each member of the Department is expected to cooperate with them, and build good will toward them. Societies of all types, associations, and individuals who are interested in promoting religious, racial, cultural, commercial, philanthropic or civic welfare and harmony play a vital role in the community life and largely crystallize public sentiment. "Their worthy objectives should be understood by, and receive the sympathetic and cooperative interest of commanding officers," says Mr. O'Brien, "but this does not mean the granting of official recognition or favors contrary to the practice and policy of the department."

The third of the four points—racial and religious attitudes—form an especially important pair in New York City with its teeming and polyglot population. This cosmopolitan character of the population is reflected in many distinctive racial and national sections or areas of the city. New York has well over a million people of Italian extraction, or about one out of eight persons. Over 700,000 Negroes reside in its borders, making it the largest Negro city in the world. Three-and-a-

half million people are members of some subdivision of the faith of Judaism, while other religions count millions of adherents.

In a congested population such as this, religious and racial prejudices, normally dormant, can be awakened with some provocation. A trifling incident can be fanned to serious proportions or magnified out of all perspective when it involves a racial or religious aspect. Crowds form quickly in an urban area like New York, false rumors spread like proverbial "wildfire," and a professional agitator could quickly generate a touchy situation. Many a bogus Messiah or cult-founder, with a train of adherents, has had to be firmly but tactfully dealt with by the Department.

In dealing with matters pertaining to racial and religious attitudes and involving crowds, the tact of the policeman are put to the test. "Above all, he must not lose his temper," says the Commissioner, "self-restraint and a calm demeanor, even when confronted with great provocation, increase the effectiveness of the policeman." Physical contact with individuals should be avoided when possible, and force called into play only as a last resort.

Mr. O'Brien believes that mere knowledge of the constitutional guarantees of racial equality and religious liberty by members of the force is not enough. "The Department and every member of it, collectively and individually, must believe in these principles, and at all times, by official and personal conduct, demonstrate such belief," he says. "The mutual respect, tolerance, and good will existing among members of this department, comprising all races and creeds, present a worthy example for all segments of the community."

The Commissioner enjoins all members of the force to be "especially alert to detect and prevent situations or conditions conducive to racial or religious tensions. Discrimination, derogatory remarks, or provocative intrusions or interference involving racial or religious groups require prompt attention."

When members of the force are assigned to duty in areas of the city predominantly inhabited by a certain racial or religious group they are to manifest the Department policy of uniformity and equality in the enforcement of the law. Sympathetic interest and prompt attention are to be given workaday problems of the people. Every effort should be made to dissipate any idea of indifference or neglect in dealing with complaints. In daily public contacts, force members are to avoid any reference to race, creed, or nationality.

"In dealing with racial or religious problems, care will be exercised that no favoritism be shown any particular group," warns the Com-

missioner. "The Department policy of impartiality will be strictly followed, and fair and just treatment accorded to all." The almost complete absence of any race riots or friction along racial lines in New York attests the effectiveness with which these principles are administered by the police force. Religious strife is also virtually unknown.

With respect to the fourth and final element of the public relations policy—the press and publicity—all members of the force are directed to cooperate fully with accredited representatives of the fourth estate and press agencies generally. "While police officers must exercise discretion with regard to information of a nature that cannot and should not be divulged, it is equally important to promptly release to representatives of the press such information as is permissible," the Commissioner states. Only information which would be premature, or jeopardize the solution of a crime, or the apprehending of a culprit, should be withheld.

"The personal conduct of each member of the Department is the *primary factor* in promoting a program of desirable public relations," emphasizes Mr. O'Brien to the members of his force. "Therefore the exercise of tact, patience, and courtesy shall be strictly observed under all circumstances, whether conducting investigations, interviewing complainants, answering the telephone or personal inquiries, or when issuing necessary instructions to the public as in policing strikes, parades, and other public assemblages."

Superior officers are especially directed to demonstrate this program by proper deportment and desirable attitudes in their dealings with subordinates and the public. They are to avoid behavior which would bring adverse criticism to the Department. They must acquaint themselves with various organized groups, societies, associations, and individuals within their respective commands who are interested in promoting religious, racial, cultural, philanthropic, commercial, or civic welfare. They are to learn the identity of key personnel, objectives or primary purposes of such organizations, and keep informed of their current civic interests.

Initial contacts with these organizations or individuals are made by commanding police officers in person. Subsequent contacts are made by commanding officers in person as far as possible or by superior officers. Contacts are to be made frequently, and all necessary cooperation made with these organizations to promote a high standard of relationship between them and the Department.

When commanding officers receive petitions or committees of protest, appeals for assistance, and letters or other modes of complaint, they

are to be given prompt personal attention and careful study, and efforts immediately made to correct the condition complained of.

Special attention is to be shown inter-racial and inter-religious problems of churches, synagogues, schools, and colleges. Close cooperation with the heads of schools and places of worship experiencing difficulties will aid in minimizing them. Parallel problems where there are mixed racial groups on streets, swimming pools, beaches, and recreational areas are to be given careful attention.

Such agencies as Precinct Coordinating Councils, the Police Athletic League (PAL), big-brother clubs, and all civic and fraternal groups are utilized wherever possible as a medium for fostering better public relations with the various service agencies, organizations, and individuals of the community. During the past year the Highway Safety Program has been developed effectively as a public relations program through school assembly groups, parent-teacher organizations, church societies, commercial groups, and fleet owners of vehicles.

A copy of the official placard titled COURTESY is conspicuously posted in all the public offices of the Department for the information of, and as a constant reminder to members of the Department that their motto toward the public is "At Your Service."

The Commissioner has given the Bureau of Public Relations the responsibility for arranging intra-departmental and inter-departmental (municipal) sports programs, including track, field and ring competitions, under the auspices of the Police Sports Association. This is done in cooperation with other amateur sports organizations, to stimulate physical and mental fitness. Uniformly good publicity always seems to have resulted from these matches.

No account of the public relations program of the Department should overlook mention of the monthly magazine SPRING 3100, a slick-paper publication of 50 to 60 pages per issue, which goes to all members of the force. It derives its peculiar name from the police telephone number. In it are carried articles of timely interest to all members of the force, articles on police science, and personal activities of interest or achievement of the individual members of the force.

In order to inculcate these principles into the "rookie" at an early phase of his police career, the Police Academy now have a course in public relations as an integral part of their Academy instruction. The classes are taught by specialists and experts in the field. A handbook entitled *Public Relations: Practical Applications of Principles by Police Officers*, is a down-to-earth, understandable explanation of the key posi-

tion each member of the force comprises in the over-all public relations program.

Commissioner O'Brien does not confine his advocacy of a high standard of public relations merely to his metropolitan "bailiwick"—it is a "gospel" which he heralds far and wide. One example of this was his address before the conference of International Association of Chiefs of Police, in Dallas, Texas, in September, 1949, in a memorable address entitled "International Improvement of Police Attitudes Toward the People Whom They Serve." Perhaps a few extracts from this speech will not be amiss as a sort of summary to this article.

In his address Mr. O'Brien stressed the fact that now when free countries of the world were striving for cooperation and mutual support to avert international chaos, police work was one of the most important fields in which unity is needed to overcome the threat of sinister forces abroad. A police factor which could do much more to strengthen the power of true democracies and the liberties of free people was the need for improvement of the attitude of police departments and police officers toward the people whom they serve.

"The mutual advantages of a friendly relationship between the people of a community and their police force are of greatest importance to all police officers, and should be more widely understood and more fully appreciated," he said. "The success of a police force in the performance of its duties is largely measured by the degree of support and cooperation it receives from the people.

"The cultivation of such desirable attitudes on the part of the public is dependent upon reciprocal attitudes on the part of the police departments, and, in accordance with this concept of mutual good will, we must carry out programs to completely effectuate proper attitudes on the part of our personnel to the citizenry. We must insure that we ourselves, and our forces, are servants of the law and that our departments are vehicles of the law which will attain for the public the highest form of police protection and constitute the greatest safeguard and exponent of personal liberty.

"The inculcation in the minds of our police officers that we, in the free nations of the world, live under legal systems which are governments of law and not of men is, therefore, of the greatest importance. Our laws are instituted to maintain liberty, not to suppress it. They are not based on the fancies or whims of men in high places, but are definite, equitable public enactments which are applied to all men without fear or favor, or personal vagaries in administration. We are all bound to act in accordance with the law, whether we be judge, legislator, policeman,

or individual in any walk of life. Our entire way of life is dependent upon the binding force of law upon all our actions.”

The Commissioner then went on to trace the policy fostered by the New York Police Department in fostering good public relations, the extent of which we have already covered.

Although a critical article or editorial appears occasionally in the press of New York City relative to the Department, it can truthfully be said that the overwhelming majority of articles and editorials about the police force are commendatory.

New Yorkers are generally proud of their Police Department and the citizenry look upon the uniformed representatives of law and order, not as hostile beings itching to make an arrest, but as a corps of law-enforcement specialists trained in almost every field of common endeavor, who are there primarily to aid and assist. This spirit has earned for the New York Police Force the well-known appellation of “The Finest.”