Feeling sorry for Chief Bennett

Published 10:48pm Monday, September 30, 2013

By Joseph L. Bass

I feel sorry for Thomas Bennett, Suffolk’s chief of police. Having the Suffolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority invite him to discuss violent crime in their complexes put him in a difficult position.

I have met Chief Bennett; he talked at our church’s men’s breakfast several years ago. He is a good person to have as our police chief. As reflected in his talk at our church and as reported in the Suffolk News-Herald, he is realistic about what police can and cannot do about crime.

A large body of criminology research evidence concludes that police activities have, at best, only very modest effects on crime. Chief Bennett seems to recognize this reality. But, of course, he couldn’t tell the Suffolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority he and police officers can’t help in some way.

He said it would be possible to institute walking police patrols on weekends and possibly employ security guards for the areas, but he didn’t say that would solve all the problems. And he also said any such increases would cost additional money that he doesn’t have.

If a lot of new money were available for additional police activities, there is no assurance it would do much good. In fact, such efforts in other cities have only moved crime from one neighborhood to another. Crime rates go down in areas of increased policing but go up in other areas.

Criminals have to make a living; they don’t stop committing crime because of police; they move to another area and continue their illegal activities.

As reported in the Suffolk News-Herald, Clarissa McAdoo, executive director of the Suffolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, “cited other efforts to reduce crime, including increasing ownership in the community through resident councils.”

Having lived in South Central Los Angeles for five years, I believe this line of thinking has the greatest potential for bringing about positive changes in housing authority complexes.

The lack of “community ownership” is a major source of many problems in these communities. Residents do not own anything in the complexes and have no way of being responsible for them.

If a window gets broken, the housing authority fixes it. If the grass needs cutting, the housing authority cuts it. If there are ants or other critters in a unit, the housing authority gets an exterminator. If there is crime in a complex, the police are supposed to deal with it. The housing authority takes all ownership away from complex residents.

The social environment created by housing authorities does not foster self help or personal responsibility among residents. During the last 50 years, government has spent trillions applying this approach to our social and economic problems with few, if any, improvements. Some think they have made our situation worse, particularly for the residents of the complexes.

The only way we can improve crime rates and other negative issues associated with housing authority complexes is to apply approaches that will truly develop community ownership among residents. Current approaches only foster dependency on government agencies.

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