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## Policing workshop aims to join perception, reality

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"Perception is reality."

That was a phrase used often at a program given at Stroud Area Regional Police headquarters on Thursday as about 40 police and community leaders came together to discuss ways that police and the community can solve problems proactively.

Led by two active police chiefs and a retired state trooper, the goal of the Police and Minority Community Relations Program is to enhance police effectiveness and officer safety during stressful situations in minority communities.

The three-part program is supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on Crime and Delinquency and is administered by the Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association. It encourages police to establish trust and dialogue within the community,

"What people see is their reality," said William Regan, project coordinator and a retired state trooper with 38 years of experience, who led the presentation. "What we try to do through this program is bring perception and reality together.

"Diversity can be an asset. This country is great because of its diversity."

Regan was assisted by Scott Bohn, chief of police in West Chester, and Mark Flanders, chief of police in Pottstown.

Racial profiling was a hot topic during the presentation.

Robert Hillman, chairman of the Monroe County Advisory Council to the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, recalled an incident some seven years ago when he worked at Tobyhanna Army Depot.

Hillman said he was stopped by police solely because he was black.

"It happened seven years ago," he said, "and I still think about it."

Other types of profiling were also discussed, including criminal profiling, which is considered a legitimate crime-fighting tool.

Communication between police and the people they serve was also discussed. Regan said that 98 percent of the complaints that people have about police center around the way police talk.

"Every challenge is new," said SARP Chief John Baujan. "We have a community of 34,000 people and 54 officers to deal with them. We need to get the word out through the media and by word of mouth to let the community know that we're here for them. We have to be honest about our resources and use them to bring people together."

Baujan said that police training has changed over the years and is constantly evolving.

"Folks have no idea how much training we go through," said SARP Capt. William Parrish. "We work hard to try to bring people together. There's a lack of understanding about what we do and how we do it."

The bottom line for many of the participants was they discovered they have similar interests and similar ideas for defusing situations.

Phase two of the program develops community-based teams to identify and resolve problems. It is not mandatory, but the group gathered was unanimous in wanting to continue.

"This is the first time I've had the opportunity to see things from the police point of view," Hillman said. "This is one of the best seminars I have ever been to. Most community members have no idea what kind of training cops go through."

That opinion was echoed among many of the participants.

"This is exactly what the community needs. We have to respect the changing demographics. We need to be more of a positive rather than a negative force. It reinforced what we felt was right," said SARP Lt. Brian Kimmins.

Pastor Marilyn Smith of Labor of Love, a community outreach in Stroud Township affiliated with the Full Gospel Church, said that she is excited about the program because of her work with the youth in the community.

"I'm looking forward to the next meeting with the chief," Smith said. "There are so many needs."

Phase two of the program is already in the works and will be announced at a later date.