

THE STATEWIDE COMMUNITY RELATIONS CENTRAL FORUM

RECORD OF THE FIRST ANNUAL COMMUNITY RELATIONS FORUM

The first annual Community Relations Forum was held on July 22, 2004. The groundbreaking event, sponsored by the South Carolina State Human Affairs Commission, was designed to create a pathway to improving community relations among the citizens of South Carolina. The means of pursuing this objective was the establishment of a mutually acceptable mission statement and targeting key segments of South Carolina's social institutions.

Over 180 individuals from across the state of South Carolina attended the forum. Improving the status of *human relations* in the state was the common goal. Also in attendance were members of several established Community Relations Councils, organizations formed under the auspices of the State Human Affairs Commission as vehicles to promote better human relations in their respective communities.

The concept of institutionalizing human relations was introduced by the Commission as a means of building an infrastructure for securing the future of healthy, productive, and sustaining community relationships among South Carolinians. All South Carolinians are considered stakeholders in the process of building relationships sequentially through:

1. *name recognition*, (who am I),
2. *association* (who am I, or we, to each other),
3. *what do we have in common* (mutual interests)
4. *interacting* (establishing dialogue), and
5. *identifying major issues* (acquiring synergy to address the "big picture")

This formal structure was considered the most effective means of establishing rapport to build relationships that would facilitate accomplishing the mission as envisioned.

Many participants provided constructive suggestions to improve upon the following statement that was recommended by the Commission:

"We, the people of South Carolina, commit ourselves to put into practice the principles of justice and equality, and promote mutual respect and understanding among South Carolina communities."

Adopted changes considered that all people of South Carolina were in fact not represented at the meeting. Another suggested revision which facilitated consensus was to emphasize "what" was to be accomplished rather than "by whom." The participants thought that the statement should reflect a written pledge of the organization or entity that

buys into the concept. The theory was that if any entity were to support a statement designed to promote positive community relations, it would be considered by others as the entity's privilege to do so.

The means by which the consensus would be achieved was through an individual entity's voluntary adoption of a uniform statement of precepts rather than a claim of unofficial representation of the people by the parties present. The following statement resulted:

“We commit ourselves to put into practice the principles of justice and equality to promote mutual respect and understanding among all people in South Carolina in order to ensure healthy communities.”

After the attendees determined how the statement should be published, the Commission proposed that the statement display certain standard characteristics, such as framing, typesetting and conspicuous placement by the subscribing entity. This would serve to recognize the active status of the entity and its collaborative status with other entities across the State that shares the common goal. This would also increase visibility within the community and position the statement to become one of the most familiar documents in the state.

The Commission proposed seven key areas of the South Carolina human relations environment that should be targeted for planting the seeds to accomplish the mission statement. The seven key areas, dubbed “stepping stones,” were identified as:

- Business/Work Environment
- Law Enforcement
- Government
- Religion
- Education
- Media
- Neighborhoods

Under the Business/Work Environment area, Commissioner Washington proposed and discussed his ideas about “A Time To Talk” program in the workplace. He explained that he has had experience facilitating town meeting discussions with groups and was the moderator for a series on ETV that encouraged community members to discuss issues and values that insure healthy and harmonious communities. The “Time to Talk” concept would encourage employees who work together to talk together; to meet, formally or informally, and talk about social issues that may divide our communities; and, to devise strategies to bridge that divide.

Commissioner Washington suggested that the “Time to Talk” concept could be successfully used in any or all of the seven key areas.

It was the general consensus of the meeting participants that the law enforcement community needs to re-emphasize its role as a friend and protector of the community's welfare rather than making its presence known primarily when crime occurs. This is

particularly true with respect to establishing its image with the community's youth population.

Concern was expressed about the significant ability of the media to influence the community relations mission. Participants were asked to spend some quality time on this subject with the suggestion that someone from the community media serve as a representative on, or as a liaison with, the local community relations program.

In addition to the seven key areas that were proposed by the Commission, two more areas were introduced by attendees. They were Health and Senior Citizens.

The remaining topics were left up to the attendees to discuss on their own after adjournment with suggested approaches made by the Commission. Attendees were charged with the "homework" of developing plans of actions for addressing the nine areas mentioned, or any additional areas they believe should be identified and targeted, and return their respective responses to the Commission. The Commission would then in turn compile the responses and publicize them on its website. The Commission further pledged to enhance the use of its website in establishing a central forum for communications via internet between councils and other entities who desire to support the building of community relations in South Carolina.