

CITY OF ATLANTA



Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB)

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OP-Editorial

MEDIATION...IT'S TIME TO TALK!

“In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity.” – Albert Einstein

Today, the Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB), Georgia’s only civilian oversight agency for law enforcement, is introducing a voluntary mediation program to the City of Atlanta so that its citizens and officers may discuss complaints in a neutral setting. The above quote from Albert Einstein aptly applies to the citizen complaint against a police officer, and what can occur from the mediation of a complaint about the officer’s behavior, actions, or comments. The goal of the program is to transform perspectives through dialogue and improve interactions between citizens and officers.

Among the many trusted relationships that we form within society, the relationship between an individual citizen and a police officer is one of the most crucial relationships where the level of trust and respect on both sides determines the outcome of an interaction. Given the many news stories from around the country and in our city, the erosion of this relationship can cause injuries, deaths, stress, and loss of financial and personal security. As the mutual trust between citizen and officer erodes, protective walls are built, ears become closed, and minds become set in a concrete barrier of blame.

Mediation is a form of alternative dispute resolution that creates an opportunity for parties to meet and discuss ways to resolve an issue. For the ACRB, the mediation program creates the opportunity for a citizen and officer to meet and discuss a citizen complaint against the officer with the assistance of a third party neutral mediator in a safe environment. It is another effort by the ACRB to start knocking down the walls and opening the ears and minds of citizens and officers through face-to-face discussions focusing on perspective sharing, increased understanding, and reconciliation.

The actions and behaviors of an individual citizen and officer who meet in a one-on-one interaction can be an educational and revealing experience. Individual biases and perceptions without regard for courtesy and mutual respect can destroy the delicate fabric of societal expectations and shape lasting perceptions that lead to general conclusions about “All you people...” and “All police officers....” respectively. The ACRB often hears citizens say “I just want to know why the officer did that...”, and some officers comment “I wanted to explain but....” It has been our experience that the time during an incident between a citizen and officer does not always lend itself to a productive conversation where perceived wrongs have occurred. Concerns about safety, perceptions about control, and feelings of anger, embarrassment, and distrust often rule that moment.

Mediation offers a faster and informal resolution to a complaint. While mediation is not suitable for every complaint, a complaint settled through mediation would be resolved and closed many months before the completion of an investigation. The settled complaint allows the citizen and officer to move forward with closure and a sense of empowerment and satisfaction.

Mediation is a bridge for communication that can lead to better relationships between citizens and officers. A neutrally safe environment offers the opportunity for personal growth and understanding that can challenge perspectives, open minds and ears as citizens and officers create their own solutions to problems. Ultimately, mediation is about citizen and officer empowerment.

Studies and discussions with participants of mediation programs have shown that parties have greater satisfaction with the outcomes of their complaints through participation in mediation. While there are skeptics and naysayers to every new endeavor, the facts prove that participants in citizen/officer conflict resolution programs appreciated the opportunity to speak directly with each other, despite initial apprehension and even when the parties could not agree after the mediation. There was value in the discussion. For those complaints that settled, there was the satisfaction of being heard, being acknowledged, having closure. Many cities across the nation have implemented mediation programs with success with the support of citizens and the active support of their local police departments and officers.

Mediation is about learning from each other and sometimes reassessing one's behavior. It requires citizens and officers to step back and re-approach an incident from a perspective of openness and shared responsibility. Sometimes an officer and/or a citizen may have to openly hear others' perspectives and comments to realize that a person may need to change. We rarely recognize how behaviors, attitudes, and comments affect others until we feel secure enough to hear and accept what we see in the mirror. That's when lasting change can occur. The ACRB mediation is not about the guilt or innocence of a citizen or the merits of the complaint against an officer. It is about both parties' willingness to understand how they got to the point of having to file a complaint.

While mediation is a reaction to a complaint, it dually serves as an opportunity to resolve the current complaint but most importantly, it has the strong potential to proactively mitigate behavior that could lead to future complaints. So we can continue to talk at each other, laying blame, and even purchase a thousand additional body cameras...OR we can talk to each other *face-to-face* with respect and openness to learn, while working toward stronger lasting relationships.

There will always be a need for law enforcement and there will always be the desire for courtesy and respect of the law and individual personhood; but it is the respectful confrontation about our actions that provides how we conform to policies, laws, and expectations.

If you ever have a concern about an interaction with an Atlanta police officer, consider mediation. Take the first step and contact the ACRB. It's time to talk!

Written by Samuel Lee Reid, II, ACRB Executive Director

Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB) established by the City of Atlanta to investigate citizen complaints of misconduct Against Atlanta Police and Corrections Officers.

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