

Solution Seeking Problem(s): Community Mediation Service

By Atty. Mike Owens

For that last two years or so, I have been working as a volunteer mediator with the Community Mediation Service.

CMS is designed to allow neighbors who are angry with each other and constantly calling police to complain about each other, to sit down at a table with a couple of mediators and work out their differences.

The mediations are voluntary and don't cost anything, but what they can do is resolve problems between neighbors and free up police officers for other, much more important work.

For example, there might be next door neighbors who are feuding over trash in the yard or a constantly barking dog. The police are called and called about the issues and eventually, instead of criminal charges, the neighbors agree to meet with mediators.

The mediators always work in a team of two and the idea is to get the neighbors in a room together to work out their differences. This is harder than it seems, since in many cases, the feuding parties have allowed time to harden their positions.

But, the mediations work. The neighbors, who may have not been talking for months or even years, are sitting next to each other and listening to their relative positions. The mediators put the parties' concerns on a big sheet of paper on a wall, so everyone knows what the issues are.

The same goes for the solutions that will end the source of the complaint. It is all very above board and solution driven. Personalities aren't allowed to enter the solution. There's no name calling. It is a very civil process.

It doesn't carry the weight of law, but the concept does work. I've seen very angry neighbors leave mediation with their issues resolved. They vow to keep the lines of communication open, they exchange phone numbers and email addresses. They vow to follow the plans approved in the mediation.

So, if mediation is so successful, why doesn't it work more? There are many places mediation can work in St. Louis. Currently, citizen complaints against police in the city of St. Louis can be handled by the mediators, but that seldom happens.

CMS has offered services to police agencies throughout the region, but seldom are the agencies willing to accept any sort of mediation with citizens. The executive director of CMS, John Doggette, has pounded the streets of the region, offering the CMS services. They don't come with a cost to the agency, and in fact, will save money over the long run. But there are few takers.

Doggette has had a huge success in Ferguson, with CMS St. Louis being named as the sole mediator in that community. Mediating between citizens and between citizens and police. It is a huge deal for CMS. CMS has already started mediating in Ferguson, at a community-wide meeting to talk about what's next for the city.

Doggette is not new to mediation. He's in his late 70's, and ran an incredibly successful mediation program in Knoxville Tennessee for years. In Knoxville, the mediators were active in all areas of the community, working with police and neighborhood groups and generally stepping up when they were asked to bring feuding sides together. The Knoxville program even provides mediators in some of the courts, notably in juvenile court.

In St. Louis, there's a crying need for mediation. Just look at the myriad police agencies operating in north St. Louis County, the "Balkanized" region that is crying out for some sort of mediation between residents and police. He's had meetings with some police and community leaders, but there seems to be some trepidation about approving mediation. Maybe the elected and employed folks are fearful of losing their power to mediators? Or maybe they just victims of inertia, unwilling to embrace the change brought about by mediation.

Whatever is slowing the process down is hurting the community. Mediation works, as has been proven in dozens of cities around the country.

The best part of mediation is that it is cheap. The mediators are volunteers and the program is so far running without any budget at all. It's done out of the goodness of volunteers and some contributors.

Doggette is hoping to come up with some funding to help the program grow and reach out to more communities. I hope we'll be hearing more about the Community Mediation Service in coming weeks. It is an idea whose time has come.

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