

## Winter Conference Seminar Speaker

# I am Muslim and I am a Deputy Sheriff. I am proud to be both.

*By Sergeant Mike Abdeen  
Muslim Community Affairs Unit  
Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department,  
California*

I am of Arabic descent; I speak the Arabic language fluently and am culturally Muslim.

When Sheriff Lee Baca expressed his interest in developing a Muslim outreach program, he said, "The Muslim-American community plays a vital role in protecting the people of the United States. Their participation and our continuing effort to both educate and engage community support is essential to the entire Homeland Security endeavor."

I thought, "This shouldn't be too difficult." I have a background in investigations and good people skills that would help me in creating a program that would benefit the community as well as work towards the mission of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. In fact, the more I thought about it, I decided, "This will be easy."

Well, let's just say this very challenging experience made me reconsider my thoughts on how easy that was going to be.

*Deputy sheriff Sherif Morsi and Sergeant Mike Abdeen with staff members of the Muslim Public Affairs Council*



*Deputy Sheriff Morsi speaking with members of the Muslim community during a family picnic celebrating Eid el Um, Mother's Day.*

### Getting Started

I started by visiting some of the Masajids\* and talking to the Imams\* in an effort to begin developing relationships. Then the plan was to eventually implement programs that are interesting as well as educational to Muslim community members.

Generally speaking, most Muslim Leaders and Imams that I spoke to were courteous and friendly. They accepted my business card by saying "Inshallah" (Arabic word for God willing). They said they would be in touch, and by knowing the culture I knew I wouldn't be hearing from them anytime soon.

### It's All About Trust

I called an elderly friend of the family and offered to buy him a cup of coffee in return for his advice on how to better connect with Imams and Muslim leaders in the area. I started by asking him why after all my efforts, isn't my phone ringing? I am a Muslim peace officer. They should be happy to talk to me.

My friend smiled and said simply, "You are a peace officer and you represent the government. They do not trust the government and they think you are collecting intelligence on them". He repeatedly said, "Gain their trust and develop a relationship which will eventually lead to more trust, and then you will be successful in your mission".

I went back to the station knowing that my approach and strategy had to be modified with the understanding that a successful outreach to any community has to be done while taking into consideration the needs and concerns of the people.

The Muslim community is no different than any other community we serve. They have needs and concerns about crime in their neighborhoods and the well being of their youth. But above all, they did not trust law enforcement. Trust had eroded after the tragic loss of life due to the attacks on September 11, 2001.

From that day on, the Muslim community became the focus of investigations, arrests and surveillances of their Mosques. Meanwhile, many Muslims became victims of hate crimes and hate incidents.

Fear became the norm. Women were afraid to go out in public and Muslims were worried about being stopped on their way to, or when leaving, prayer services. Like any members of the public, when community members fear law enforcement and do not feel as equally protected as other members of society, then trust, support, and cooperation are lost. We all know well that without the support and trust of the community, our job will be less efficient and a whole lot tougher. In fact, trust is one of the key differences between civil societies and third world countries.

### We All Want Freedom

Experience in the last couple of years working as a liaison with the Muslim community has taught me that building trust and partnership with each community is the key to the success of any outreach effort. Most immigrants, both Muslims and non-Muslims, come to America looking for a second chance, an opportunity to succeed, but above all freedom. Freedom is something often taken for granted here in America, but for sure it is something many did not enjoy in their native countries. Therefore, most Muslim-Americans do not take it for granted.

*Sergeant Mike Abdeen and Deputy Sherif Morsi speaking at a town hall meeting.*



*Sheriff Lee Baca is greeted by members of the Muslim community before a town hall meeting at an Islamic Center in Los Angeles County.*

### Reaching Out

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department / Muslim Community Affairs Unit (LASD/MCA) developed an outreach program that is being modeled by other agencies on local, state and federal levels. The outreach program includes a Young Muslim-American Leaders Group program. This is an educational program that is designed for young Muslim professionals and college students aged 18-30 years old. The group meets on a monthly basis to learn about law enforcement functions and gives suggestions for improvements to communicating with the Muslim community.

Sheriff Baca meets with the Muslim community at least quarterly, in a Town Hall setting where he addresses the community's concerns, and answers any questions they might have. The Sheriff's Town Hall meetings are held at Mosques, Islamic centers or community halls where he enjoys sharing an ethnic meal with local Muslims.

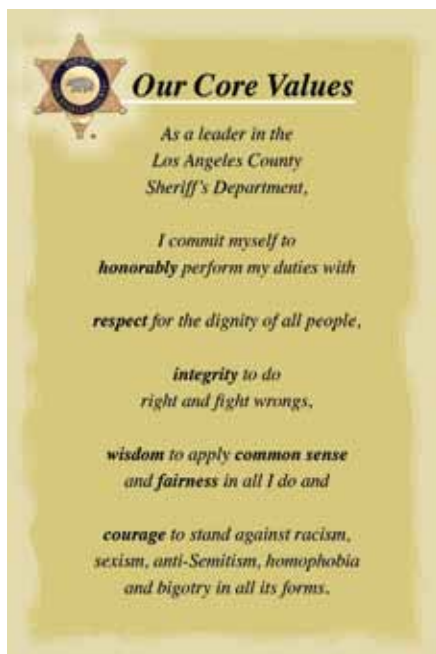
Deputies from the Muslim Community Affairs Unit, and from throughout the Department regularly attend events, celebrations and Eid\* holidays with Muslim community members.

### Reaching In

Sheriff's Department and police recruits attend a two-hour training program (Islam 101) at the Academy before they graduate. They learn about the culture of Islam, terminology, and the basic etiquette on how to interact with Muslims in the community or when entering a Mosque. Reaching in is as challenging as reaching out. Most law enforcement officers are not exactly excited about the idea of outreach to the Muslim community. This is usually due to a lack of understanding and misinformation about the Muslim culture.

### We Need To Talk

It is equally important for the program's success that we reach out to other law enforcement agencies so as to avoid duplication of effort as well as sharing the experience of outreach. An outreach coordinators group was developed



by the LASD/MCA to include representatives of other local, state and federal agencies. These include the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Transportation Security Administration (TSA), United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the City of Los Angeles Office of Human Relations and Community Development. The outreach coordinators group meets bi-monthly to discuss outreach efforts and to plan mutual activities with the Muslim community, such as inter-agency Town Hall meetings and round table discussions.

### Relationships Make The Difference

Relationships take time to develop and strengthen. It has to be sincere and genuine, but once established, the benefits are countless. If you want the phone to ring from the community you have to be there when they need you. Sometimes the answer is, "No, I can't help with this one."

### Glossary of Terms:

**Islam-** The religion and the faith Muslims follow and practice

**Muslims-** The followers and the believers of Islam

**Mohammad-** the name of the prophet, and God's messenger who started Islam when contacted by God through the angel Gabriel.

**Quran-** The holy book for Muslims

**Hijab-** head cover worn by Muslim women as a sign of modesty

**Masjid-** place of worship for Muslims also known as Mosque

**Imam-** The person leading the prayer in the Mosque

**Inshallah-** God willing in Arabic

**Eid-** A religious holiday celebrated by Muslims at the end of Ramadan and at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca

**Eid Mubarak-** The proper greeting to Muslims during the holiday, it means "blessed holiday"

**Arabic-** The official language of the Quran

**Arabs-** Natives of Arab countries, there are 22 Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa

### Diversity and Los Angeles County

At least 62 different languages are spoken by the culturally diverse sheriff's deputies, civilians and volunteers of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, reflecting the diversity of the county. One out of three of the 10.5 million people who live in Los Angeles County were born outside the United States, and over 50% of the households speak a language other than English.

The Muslim Community Affairs Unit will be making a presentation at the National Sheriffs Association Winter Conference in Palm Desert, California, January 5-8, 2011.

To read more about Muslim Outreach and the Muslim Community Affairs Unit of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, visit [www.lasd.org](http://www.lasd.org) and see the next edition of the National Sheriffs Association *Deputy and Court Officer* magazine.

Yet it is also good to know that when we need something from the community we know who to call and where to possibly find what we need. It's important to remember that it has to be a two way street. As with most things in life, anything worthwhile is rarely easy. ✪

*Mike Abdeen is a Sergeant and 19 year veteran of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. With Sheriff Lee Baca, he established the Muslim Community Affairs Unit, the first of its kind in the nation, with the objective of building a meaningful relationship with the Muslim Community in Los Angeles County. For more information on the LASD/MCA unit visit [www.lasd.org](http://www.lasd.org), [www.lasd.org/sites/muslim-outreach](http://www.lasd.org/sites/muslim-outreach) or email [Muslimoutreach@lasd.org](mailto:Muslimoutreach@lasd.org).*