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United States Mission to the OSCE

OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination Intervention for Session 2

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September 04, 2003

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies.

While we have gathered these two days to share programs and strategies to combat racism, discrimination and xenophobia in all their insidious forms, the heart of our concern are human beings – people who regardless of race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, language, age, disability, gender, sexual orientation – strive for a life of dignity with fair and respectful treatment by all whom they encounter, and in particular by their own government. An apropos quote goes: “The opportunity for brotherhood presents itself every time you meet a human being.”

Many U.S. states have civil and human rights commissions as part of the formal government structure. My experience is with just such a department in the state of Michigan, home to more than 9 million people, including several American Indian tribes, the second largest community of Arabs outside the Middle East, and a rich diversity of old and new immigrant groups seeking to make a better life. Hopefully during conversations at this conference, I can share more detailed information with those who may be interested about the development, implementation, challenges, and progress with these initiatives in Michigan. I also look forward to learning more about promising practices for preventive work among OSCE members, in order that I can take new ideas back to my home state.

That said, I respectfully offer the following eight recommendations for consideration by OSCE participating states, based on the experience of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights:

1. Form structured civil and human rights commissions at the national level, as part of the government structure.
2. Urge local authorities to establish human relations commissions at the local level, and encourage the national agencies to support their work through relevant coordinated activities, such as providing professional development, opportunities to network and share promising practices.
3. Assign formal departmental liaisons to provide a dedicated line of contact and communication to different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in order that their concerns be communicated before escalation.

4. Recognize NGO's and the valuable contributions they make to a civil society; work in closer collaboration with them in the design and implementation of programs to prevent and eliminate intolerance, racism and discrimination; and assist NGO's in handling the civil and human rights complaints brought to them by populations they represent, as well as bolster their infrastructure for more effective institution building by the NGO's themselves.
5. Encourage the development of programs to build the cultural competency of government workers, so they have a rudimentary understanding of the background of different populations seeking government services and can facilitate access by all residents.
6. Develop community-based assessments of civil rights health, which can be conducted in a voluntary, non-judgmental way for a community to evaluate its own conditions, according to its own terms and perspectives.
7. Promote alliances of law enforcement agencies, community organizations, and civil rights groups to combat hate crimes and bias incidents, focusing on community response, victim support, community policing, law enforcement training, data collection, and education and public awareness, including media relations.
8. Prepare age-specific materials for elementary through secondary school and college students to educate them about the diverse groups in their locale and inform them of relevant issues, civil and human rights laws, and responsibilities under these laws.

In closing, may I share a significant perspective learned by Michigan on the value of developing trust through partnerships. When realities of 9.11 became evident, my state had such good and strong partnerships in place that we were immediately able to communicate with each other as friends and colleagues in a shared civil right struggle, not as strangers in the midst of a horrific tragedy and crisis. While Michigan was not immune from civil rights violations, bias incidents, and hate crimes among its residents of Arab and Chaldean descent and the Muslim religion - - and those perceived as such - - there is absolutely no question but that the strength of existing relationships allowed for respectful and thoughtful resolution to concerns at hand. In other words, by proactively dealing with civil and human rights issues in advance of a crisis and with the variety of stakeholders, we in Michigan were spared what could have been more alarming reactions.

Please accept my sincere appreciation for this opportunity to address this august body, and to share ideas on strategies OSCE might consider to strengthen its promotion of non-discrimination and equal protection of all rights for all persons.

Thank you.