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BADGE & GUN August 2009

Attorney General Holder Likes Education-Based Discipline

By Tom Kennedy

WASHINGTON - Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. has offered the nation's top police union leaders - including HPOU President Gary Blankinship - a seat at the table with the federal government in its ongoing fights over gang violence, border security and crime fighting in the context of economic crisis.

Holder told the leaders of employee groups tasked with representation of law enforcement officers across the nation that Washington hasn't established that reputation in the recent past.

"Things will be different now," the attorney general said, speaking to about 70 union representatives at "The Big 50," Harvard University's convention of police union leaders in April.

Holder initiated his appearance at the meeting of local, state and national law enforcement representatives and was the principal speaker at the group's 10th annual meeting. It was the first time a U. S. attorney general made such an appearance.

The AG drew positive reaction from many of the union leaders present. He pledged to build relationships in law enforcement's current priorities and outlined the fiscal supports for police in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Referencing the ongoing battle against Russian and Mexican cartels, the leaders asked Holder to reexamine obsolete consent decrees. They also made it clear they would hold him to his promise to prosecute accused officers based on evidence and not public pressure.

The agenda of the Big 50 conference has grown from responding to public charges of excessive force by police to discussions of much more sophisticated approaches to racial profiling, new policing technologies, recruitment and innovative approaches to ending gang violence.

This year there was quite a reaction to the innovative concept of "education-based discipline," conceived by Los Angeles County Sheriff Leroy D. Baca. The concept allows officers to choose additional training over the standard punitive "suspension without pay" in certain cases.

It is believed to be more fitting than the past practices in which the no-pay penalties severely affected the families of officers.

The union leaders' reaction to "education-based discipline" was generally very positive. Many of them vowed to better educate their constituencies on the concept in hopes of implementing it as an alternative to harsher penalties.

