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2 from Va. to lead unity organization

National group's goal is to improve relations among communities

BY MEREDITH BONNY

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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For years, Hope in the Cities has led efforts to improve race relations in Richmond. Now, two of its leaders have been appointed to head the organization's national parent group, Initiatives of Change-USA.

Don Cowles has been named executive director, and Rob Corcoran will serve as national director. The parent organization, based in Washington, is part of an international network focused on bridging division in communities.

Cowles, 58, will be responsible for the group's finances, legal affairs and human resources. Corcoran, 56, will oversee national program development, public outreach and communications. They will remain active in Richmond's Hope in the Cities.

"Our responsibilities are now national," Corcoran said this week. "I think it is a great tribute to the Richmond community."

Initiatives of Change-USA has no formal membership. With 15 paid employees, it has numerous chapters across the country and hundreds of volunteers, Corcoran said.

Cowles said in a news release that Initiatives of Change's mission "is to bring hope and healing to America's increasingly diverse national community by demonstrating qualities of trust and unselfish partnership."

Corcoran's work with Initiatives of Change spans four decades and has taken him to Europe, Asia and Africa. Since coming to Richmond in 1980, he has focused on promoting racial reconciliation.

Cowles joined Initiatives of Change in 2002, serving as co-chair of the Hope in the Cities board after his retirement from Alcoa/Reynolds Metals Co., where he was chief legal and human resource officer.

Hope in the Cities' first major event in Richmond dates back to 1993, when it co-sponsored a conference called "Healing the Heart of America." The event drew people from across the country to have an "honest conversation about race reconciliation and responsibility," Corcoran said.

"It has been a model for other communities with difficult histories that need to come together," he said. "The whole philosophy is start with yourself."

Such Hope in the Cities projects will continue, Corcoran said. Cowles and Corcoran will keep their base offices in Richmond. Funds raised in Richmond for Richmond operations will continue to be used locally, the news release said.

The group is working on a project focused on school integration and plans to host a series of dialogues across the metropolitan area on this topic, Corcoran said.

The new duties assumed by Cowles and Corcoran "will bring a greater international perspective to what happens in Richmond," Corcoran said. "We feel very positive."

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