Peace Islands Institute (PII) hosted Mr. Michael Ward, SAC, FBI Newark Division, at the latest luncheon. His speech was entitled “Hopes and Concerns in the Threshold of Second Decade of 9/11: A Law Enforcement Perspective”. The program started off with reception where guests had an opportunity to meet each other and enjoy the fellowship. Mr. Ward started his presentation showing a video on terrorism. He speech was followed by Q&A session. Below is a summary of Mr. Ward’s speech:

“First thing we need to understand is the definition of terrorism. It is the use of force, violence or threat to bring about social or political change or unrest. Terrorism is an ideology and there isn’t a specific definable group that we are battling against that we are at war with. It is a mindset and that mindset can infiltrate all people regardless of their background, religion, creed or culture. If you look back in your history lessons going back centuries, people have engaged in attacks and wrongdoing and every time somebody does something that they can justify their actions. We had people who rationalized and justified their actions based on an interpretation on religion going back for centuries and that applies to all religions.

One of the problems that we have today is that the perception that there is a linkage between counter terrorism and certain religions. And, that is wrong. Religion does not drive counter terrorism. It is individuals who decide to go out and do something for personal reasons, or small group of individuals or maybe they band together with some like-minded individuals. They do it for personal reasons and then they provide justification. It is important that this message goes out because there are people that sit there and say, for example, “Islam is a religion that promotes terrorism”. No it doesn’t. I can give you a half of dozen examples - I’m Christian - of attacks perpetrated by people of Christian faiths and backgrounds, but yet I don’t believe that my religion promotes terrorism. But you have those examples. One thing that you will not hear the FBI in NJ do is to link religion to counter terrorism, because it is not a driving force. If somebody goes out and robs a bank, I do not sit there and ask them what religion they are.
As we move forward in the future one of the critical areas in which we're going to have to address this ideology is going to be on the Internet. Right after 9/11 one of the concerns we had was there was certain individuals that held beliefs and they would personally go out and radicalize especially the youth and brain wash them into accepting this mindset. You should be careful with Internet just like you wouldn't let someone in your house that you didn't know. What we are seeing now is that a lot of people are being radicalized based on that they are sitting at home, spending hours on the internet, visiting these sites that are nothing but blogs, messages, videos of beheading and tortures and things of that nature and it can affect especially a young person; it can affect them and cause them to develop a certain mindset.

In our ability to become successful is to counteract, counter balance the message that is out there on the Internet. And, how can we legally patrol the content on the Internet? For example, if someone brought to me some information that a certain individual is visiting the top 10 bad websites 500 times, what do I do? Do I ignore it and assume that they are not being radicalized or do we look into it? We start with an assessment; we slowly get into it, and see why they are visiting these websites. We slowly roll into an investigation. The large percentage of what we do is identifying and making sure that there is an absence of a threat.

One of the key issues about the counter terrorism threat was our belief that Al-Qaeda was to strike out and have a spectacular attack like they had at 9/11. They were looking for a repeat. One of the biggest issues that we have is how do we address that terrorist threat. There has been a lot of discussion and controversy about this. We don't go out and look to arrest everybody that comes up in a counter terrorism case. What we are looking to do is “prevent the next attack” so we have to be out there, we have to be engaged with the community, we need to be talking. So, if something starts to bubble up and gives people concern, we get a chance to address it early and maybe we get to turn it around through some sort of community outreach and get them involved with the right people and turn them around. We have to investigate and neutralize that threat. And, sometimes the only way to neutralize that threat is to eventually follow that person down that path that they are going, and then when they get to certain point we arrest them and take them into custody, that's how we neutralize that threat.

We always have to be on guard. I think that the most likely threat that any of us will face will be a small arms style of attack; what we call a soft target. We're always going to be concerned about bridges, transportation, colleges, shopping malls, and movie theatres – the soft targets. That's what the concern is. Even though we talk about the JTTF and the successes of the JTTF, it becomes a community issue as well. The JTTF can't be everywhere at all times. It's important that the local police are really engaged and they're knowledgeable; they know the latest and greatest on what the threat is. That they need to know that these soft targets are really a possibility that is being emphasized. The NYPD started the Slogan “SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING”, this is very important. We have to know what's going on and if there is something out there, which is unusual, which gives you concern, you have to report it and we have to take a look at it.

The program continued with question and answers. We thank Mr. Ward for his insightful presentation and answering all the questions.