

Community Policing and Tactical Proficiency Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello, and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. As most of our listeners are aware, the United States Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services focuses on the nationwide advancement of community policing. But sometimes when people think of community policing, they may not always consider that at the core of community policing is identifying and responding to the issues and individuals that pose threats to a community and apprehending or responding to violent criminals is an unavoidable part of that process. This is why the COPS Office has had a long association with the National Tactical Officers Association and counts them as one of our vital partners in the community policing continuum.

Today, our guest is Thor Eells. He's the Executive Director of the National Tactical Officers Association. Mr. Eells, welcome to *The Beat*.

Thor Eells

01:14

Thank you very much. It's good to be here.

Donelan

01:17

I'm really excited about this conversation because we're going to talk about some different situations, but words that have sparked some controversy in the community and that's going to be those no-knock warrants. And I can't wait to discuss this with you because you have some insight that I think is going to be beyond valuable to our listeners. So, let's start off with first some of the basics. Tell us about the National Tactical Officers Association, the issues you address, who you represent, and sort of the range of resources that you offer in the field.

Eells

01:46

Well, I'm happy to. And thank you for the opportunity. The National Tactical Officers Association was created in 1983 as a nonprofit association focused primarily on assisting the tactical community, perhaps better known as the SWAT community, in enhancing their professionalization, achieving better training, quality training. In over the past decades, we have morphed to an association of 40,000 plus

members representing 23 countries on five different continents, representing over 18,000 law enforcement agencies. But we've grown beyond the SWAT community into helping patrol our primary first responders to many of the critical incidents, negotiators, corrections, and what has become known as Tactical Emergency Medical Services, TEMS, and those disciplines.

And last year, in 2021, we were able to provide over 5,000 officers various training and that covered over 30 different topics in over 200 courses. This has been our, what we believe, mandate to increase public safety through education and professionalization. And we continue that today.

Donelan

03:10

So, 5,000 officers received training. Do you offer standards of practice, guidelines for various law enforcement agencies? What's the training basically consist of?

Eells

03:20

Well, the training covers a variety of topics. There's many, many different types of courses that we instruct in. Some, as I mentioned, are primarily focused towards patrol officers and/or deputies that are your first responders. An example would be what we call SOAR, Single Officer Assailant Response, which obviously is getting a lot of attention following many of these active assailant and active shooter incidents. All the way up to advance hostage negotiations training in a variety of different disciplines within that.

And I think to your question, Jennifer—you're asking about standards—we don't set any standards per se with regard to the courses individually. We believe that our training is the very best that is available to law enforcement. We pride ourselves in that; I think we've developed our reputation upon that. But outside of the SWAT community where we have developed national standards for the SWAT team specifically, which speaks to personnel requirements, equipment requirements, training requirements, capabilities, things of that nature, but in an individual class, we do have, in many cases, a pass-fail capability. But as you might be aware, unfortunately, in the United States, there are very, very few standards with regard to training.

Donelan

04:45

Which is going to become key as we go through the rest of our discussion. So, let's hop into what I mentioned at the beginning and that is the no-knock warrant. So, no-knock warrants—and you are the expert; you stop me and correct me if I get any of this wrong, but here's my take at it—no-knock warrants are generally used in circumstances in which knocking and announcing could possibly lead to destruction of evidence or—and this one's the key one—jeopardize the safety of officers or other individuals, other citizens.

However, as we all know, there are differences of opinions across the field on the efficacy of no-knock warrants versus other approaches that I'd like you to get into such as surround and call out and any other ones that you might want to discuss. Some departments have just significantly reduced their use of no-knock warrants. Some have even eliminated the use of no-knock warrants in all but obviously extreme cases. What has driven these considerations? And then where does your organization stand on this form of dynamic entry?

Eells

05:48

Well, three questions there. And so, I'll start with the last one first with regard to dynamic entry and where we stand on that. And this is a key aspect of really understanding no-knock warrants and what they were originally intended for, how they're currently being utilized, or not being utilized, and the reasons why. But dynamic entry itself, in its original and true form definition, speaks to the method in which an entry team is moving; they're moving dynamically, which most people tend to associate with their speed of their movements. So, they're moving quickly, trying to get into a structure and take control of that structure as they quickly and safely and possibly can, which is not truly what a no-knock warrant is.

Now, you are correct in that it's been misunderstood; it's been misrepresented. Not necessarily willfully, but just through a lack of true understanding, as one and the same. And I would absolutely agree with you that the term no-knock and dynamic entry, albeit two separate topics or categorizations, have morphed into one and they're interchangeably utilized, and it creates and/or adds to that confusion. The no-knock warrant was created as a judicial exception to the knock and announce requirements, which is statutorily mandated by our courts, and rightfully so.

And in the United States, you know, we are a castle-doctrine country, meaning, you need to be free from search and seizure, particularly in your home or place of residence, and we hold that to the highest of standards. And we demand that our law enforcement professionals, that if they're going to breach that threshold and enter into a place of residence or a home, they have to meet certain requirements, the primary one being knock and announce. So, you have to present your information to a judge, rise to a level of probable cause that you believe a crime has been committed, about to be committed, that type of thing, and what you want to search for. After judicial review, the judge agrees, they sign the warrant. And then you go, and then you have to knock, you have to announce.

And the third part of the requirement, which is never really reported, but is the most critical or at least on par with the other two requirements, is you must wait a reasonable period of time. So, you have to knock in some manner, you have to announce your presence and who you are, and then you wait a reasonable period of time. The reasonable period of time is determined by the circumstances that present themselves and potentially what type of evidence you're hoping to secure. Is it a person versus disposable narcotics? All of that comes into place in determining the reasonableness in terms of period of time. The time of day, the size of the structure there you're at—all of those have a bearing on that.

So, if I show up at a small motel where the door is right next to the bed and I knock and I announce, a reasonable period of time may be a matter of seconds, and it's in the middle of the day when most people are awake and up and moving around. I take that exact same warrant, but I go and I serve the warrant at 3:00 a.m. when people are normally sleeping, and I'm at a large individual residence that's 4,000 or 5,000 square feet and the bedroom is located quite a ways from the front door where I'm knocking and announcing, it may be more reasonable to wait several minutes.

The no-knock exception, judicial exception, arose out of what's commonly referred to as the war on drugs in which law enforcement was serving a lot of narcotics-related warrants where the evidence that was being sought was easily destructible narcotics, primarily cocaine and/or crack cocaine, a derivative. And many of the suspects that were engaged in that activity had criminal ties, either were known gang members or had lengthy criminal records in narcotics dealings. They had records involving weapons and potentially violence.

And so, the thought was that in order to secure that evidence and/or overcome any potential resistance to the police present that having a waiver, this judicial exception to knocking, announcing, and waiting, we wouldn't have to adhere to that. We would be judicially exempted with prior approval from that. And that through that, then as law enforcement showed up at a location, they could do this immediate breach entry, overcome any resistance, and secure evidence before it was destroyed. And so, that's really kind of the history of all of that.

And so, the third part of your question, Jennifer, was where does the NTOA stand on the utilization of no-knock warrants. And our position is really relatively unchanged for past 20 years. We have strenuously discouraged any utilization of dynamic entry tactic other than in hostage-rescue scenarios. And coupled with that, we have done our best to try and educate our professionals in differentiating dynamic entry movement from what a no-knock warrant is, or more importantly, is not, and discouraging the use of no-knock warrants.

And the reason that we discourage both has to do with what we call safety priorities in which we help them evaluate risk and determine the best ways to mitigate the risk to not only law enforcement in the personnel that are serving the warrant, but to any potential occupants of the location where the warrant is being served or in the immediate vicinity. And it is our belief, based upon years of evaluation of these tactics as well as post-incident analysis, that there are other alternatives that are more likely to be safer and effective in mitigating this risk than the utilization of no-knock warrants.

Donelan

12:01

How has that been met by the law enforcement community? I'm assuming you've gotten various reactions to that.

Eells

12:08

Absolutely. The vast majority understand it, have adopted it, and support it. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that in light of some of the several high-profile incidents that have taken place that it hasn't been but a bit of an eye opener to us that a fair number of agencies are still using no-knock warrants, which is understandable. There's a limited time in place, perhaps for some, but unfortunately, there are some agencies that are using them as a matter of routine and that's unfortunate. I think that is a ticking time bomb in which it's just a matter of time before there's a less than desirable outcome.

Donelan

12:53

So, Mr. Eells, would it be fair to summarize, basically, and I may be oversimplifying it, but in the argument in favor of the no-knock warrant seems to be more about preservation of evidence and less about preservation of life on either side of the line, right? Whether it's an officer's life or a citizen's life. And the argument against doing those no-knock warrants is the emphasis is on preservation of life, not preservation of evidence. Is that too basic?

Eells

13:18

Well, I think it's a little basic in that those that are still supporters of no-knock warrants when we have the conversations with them in our trying to get them to understand our position and why we believe it's safer, they do truly believe that it is an issue of safety. That it is much safer for them to not announce their presence and have to wait than the alternative knocking, announcing, and waiting. And so, they do believe that it is a safety issue.

Our position is that it unnecessarily creates an environment in which you're compressing time and distance between law enforcement and a potential adversary. And when you compress time, distance, under stress, that's when there's potential or greater potential for a misinterpretation, misunderstanding, miscommunication, and then ultimately, there's a bad outcome. And so, we want to do the opposite. We want to try and use and leverage time, distance to mitigate the risk and not increase it.

Donelan

14:34

What about active shooter? Active responses? There's something actively going on. It's not necessarily the result of an investigation. It's something like we may have an active shooter at a school or at a community center or a church. What sort of... And there's been a lot of talk about "go in now," "don't go in now," you know, dynamic entry versus not. Where does the NTOA stand on those types of situations? What's your best advice on them?

Eells

14:59

Well, those are entirely different scenarios. And, you know, not to state the obvious, but warrant service is preplanned, so we have the luxury, if you will, “of picking the time, the date, when we serve the warrant, when we’re able to control a lot of the tools, the tactics, the personnel, the environment to the best of our ability.” An active assailant scenario is spontaneous. There’s little or no time for any preplanning, and you’re operating in a very reactive role. And so, a lot of the success will be determined upon your preplanning in what training and skill sets you’ve mastered prior to an event.

But the key difference really is an active assailant is on par with a hostage-rescue type of scenario. Meaning that innocent people are in imminent danger of serious bodily injury and/or death. That is law enforcement’s highest priority to intervene in that. That’s why we do hostage rescue. It’s [an] unbelievably dangerous thing to do hostage rescue for law enforcement and the hostage as well as the hostage taker. So, the only reason we’re intervening is because we honestly believe that the chance of mitigating death to innocence is greater by us doing that.

And so, the principle that we operate under an active assailant is called IDOL—In Defense of Life. Meaning, law enforcement is prepared to take extreme risk to our own safety to save the lives of innocent people that are unable to save themselves. The suspect is the least of our worries. Our primary focus and goal is to secure the safety of those that are in harm’s way. And so, one of the things it talked about is, you know, law enforcement is trained to “neutralize the threat.” And there is truth to that, but neutralizing does not necessarily mean that we’re going to shoot and kill the suspect.

It may mean that we’re able to get into a position that we’re between the suspect and innocent victims. It may mean that we chased the suspect down a hallway, and they run into a broom closet and accidentally lock themselves in there. That’s perfect. We’ve neutralized the threat in that manner. And it allows us to then safely secure the people that were in harm’s way, either through evacuation, shelter-in-place with us remaining in close proximity to them. But our top priority is to intervene to save people that aren’t able to help themselves.

Donelan

17:35

So, is your position or the position of NTOA that you’ve got to act, you’ve got to go?

Eells

17:40

It is our position that IDOL—In Defense of Life—is the overarching principle guiding the tactics that you’re going to employ.

Donelan

17:50

As you're talking, it's made me wonder about a couple of things. When you break down the no-knock warrant—the difference between that and a knock and wait, the explanation that goes behind that—are you guiding law enforcement agencies in any form or manner to have these sort of discussions with the community and to educate? Because without that education, you know, they're all these gaps that get filled in. And you know, I think the key to all of it, right, is communication and education. And I'm just wondering what role does NTOA play, if any, in terms of guiding law enforcement to talk to their communities about their different tactics, and the reasons behind them, and the laws, et cetera, as you've just done for our listeners.

Eells

18:34

Well, the answer to that is not directly. And by that I mean we strongly encourage those that attend our training on these various topics, as well as our Command College, in which we have over 200 participants, engaged in that where we focus on leadership, command, and control of critical incidents. And we strongly encourage law enforcement to be actively engaged in this communication and education in helping their various stakeholders, their community members, in understanding why they do, what they do, when they do it.

Those three questions to us, we believe, should be routinely asked and answered. And without getting into the nitty-gritty details of some of the things we do which could compromise officer safety, we do believe that there's an awful lot of information that can be openly shared, which would develop a better understanding of why their respective law enforcement agency is doing what they're doing. And that would go a long way to help develop trust and understanding.

Donelan

19:42

Right, and understandably so. You know, for those who are not in the law enforcement community, trained, experienced, there tend to be, and understandably so, blanket generalizations about, "Well, this is how police do what they do." And they have no idea that one law enforcement agency in their area may have certain practices where the other law enforcement agency does not. And if you're not educating, because citizens in your particular jurisdiction, they don't know the difference. They don't know whether or not you have a no-knock warrant policy or if you have a chase policy.

And again, you just said it, too, there are some things that obviously, operationally, in order to protect the safety of your officers and the citizens, you can't share everything. But it does seem to me that especially now more than ever, education seems to be such a key component of this, ahead of the bad thing happening, right?

Eells

20:31

Absolutely. There's no question that that is arguably the most lacking and yet critical need that we have right now. You know, most Americans do not know that there are over 18,000 police departments in America today and that 80 percent of them have fewer than 50 officers. Forty-nine percent of them have fewer than 10 officers. We have over 3,000 sheriffs' departments. So, right there, you have over 21,000 law enforcement agencies in America, of which 80 percent have fewer than 50 officers.

So, their resources, whether it's personnel, equipment, access to training, are significantly different than the large agencies that we frequently think about because many of us happen to live in larger municipalities and have those types of resources. But the truth is most agencies do not have that and no agency is identical to another agency. And we lack standards in this country to, you know, our earlier conversation, which don't necessarily facilitate good interoperability and things of that nature.

You know, the Fire Service does a very, very good job of having a lot of standardization in their training, in their equipment, in how they define equipment, terminology; it's all very, very uniform. That is not the case in law enforcement. You know, their state POST, which stands for Peace Officer Standardized Training, most states have one, but all 50 states, they're different. And so, the minimums, you know, the age that you can become a law enforcement officer, the length of a basic academy, the curriculum in a basic academy—all of that is very, very different.

And so, you are correct in that the general public's perception of what an agency may be able to do is not likely to be correct, unless an agency has taken the time and made the effort to be transparent about what they can, and maybe in some cases, more importantly, cannot do. And so, the public's primary source of information comes from the media, social media, which may or may not be correct, or Hollywood. You know, you watch one or two TV shows, and suddenly you're an expert in law enforcement procedure and, unfortunately, that's just not the truth.

Donelan

22:53

Right, or a situation in one state makes national headlines, and unless that communication education exists, you don't know that your law enforcement in your state doesn't necessarily follow those, or they have a different policy when it comes to the particular action. It really is about digging in and talking. So, I'm really glad to hear you talking about this and the fact that you talked to your different agencies. And just the encouragement there to have these conversations with community.

You just landed some numbers there. You know, how many of our law enforcement agencies are 50 officers or less. So, these 50 officers or less, these particular departments don't have the luxury to say, "Okay, we have a SWAT team and they just do SWAT." They have officers who are out there doing their normal beats, but then they have to put on a different uniform if that, you know, hostage situation unfolds or if there's a planning for a warrant. Talking about mind readiness, do you train officers on how to, you know, sort of step in and out of... because that's two different mindsets, I would assume.

Eells

23:51

Well, yes and no. And so, the yes part of it is we expect our officers or deputies to be able to interface and interact with the general public on a day-to-day basis in a very professional, friendly, approachable manner.

Donelan

24:09

Sure. No matter what their job is, right?

Eells

24:11

Correct.

Donelan

24:11

No matter what the title is. Absolutely, absolutely.

Eells

24:14

And yet on the other hand, if a SWAT team is being activated and put into use, they're not likely to be interfacing with the general public. They're interfacing with somebody who has likely committed a very serious crime, usually a felony. It's frequently associated with some sort of violence and/or weapons and that's a completely different scenario and it requires a completely different sort of skill set in what you're going to do. So, that's the yes part.

On the other hand, whether you're an officer or deputy on day-to-day patrol in your normal assignment, you should be mentally prepared for any type of untoward or unanticipated event. And yet, you still have to maintain that same calm demeanor that is approachable and can deal with the public. I mean, the vast majority of the public are not criminals. It's [a] very, very small percentage that are engaged in criminal activity or acts of violence and things like that. So, you know, the common terminology or the debate that has arisen in the last few years is: Do we want law enforcement personnel to be guardians or do we want them to be warriors?

And you know, my take on that and has been from day one is that they're really one and the same, but this isn't, to your point and I really appreciate the words that you've used with regard to education, it's an education issue. If the true definition and background of what a warrior was originally defined as, you would find those are exactly the traits that we probably want for law enforcement. We want them to be people that are brave and bold and protective of those that aren't capable of protecting themselves and being capable and willing to put themselves in harm's way to accomplish that.

That was the original warrior as, you know, decades ago, 100 years ago, was utilized that word, that terminology. And somehow, it became a bad word. You didn't want to be a warrior. We had incidents in which, you know, warrior was being assigned to say, "Well, if an officer has a warrior mentality then they believe that they're at war with the general public," and things like that, which quite honestly I don't think is true at all. I don't think there's any real validation of that, but nonetheless, it gained traction and became an issue.

Donelan

26:45

Right, right.

Eells

26:46

And then the shift was, "Well, we want people to be guardians." And I think that's fine, but everybody wants them to be a guardian right up until they need them to be a warrior. And so, I think, to your point, the difficult question is, "Well, how do we ask one versus the other, and then expect them to be able to just flip a switch?" Which is a very unrealistic expectation.

And, you know, let's just address some of the issues here. You know, there's a lot of criticism on law enforcement's response to some high-profile incidents dating back several years, whether it's in Florida, in Las Vegas, or in Texas, or elsewhere. I will say, from my 30-plus-year career in law enforcement and having been involved in numerous critical incidents, it's difficult to predict how somebody is going to behave under stress like that when there's that degree of violence occurring in front of them or around them, despite training. And the mental aspect of it is just one component of consideration and we certainly have not mastered it by any means.

Donelan

27:46

It's training. It just sounds to me, the more and more you talk, it's coming down to training and practice and drilling and practice and training and drilling. Because when those moments happen, everyone's human. Police officers, no matter what your beat is, whether you're on the SWAT team or not, everybody puts their pants on the same way, right? And like you said, it can happen in a moment's notice, it can happen wherever, and you have to automatically flip into, and you are both at once—you're guardian and warrior.

And warrior shouldn't have to be a bad word, because quite frankly, if you're going toe-to-toe with a really bad person who's intending to inflict harm on other people, you know, this is not an easy job. And that is the biggest understatement of the world. This is not an easy job. It's a tough job. It's a scary job. And I'm just glad that they have organizations like NTOA to help provide some of that training, a lot of that training in these particular instances, so that they can fall back on that. Because it becomes one of those things that if you haven't had the training, you haven't had the experience, and that moment happens—you've got to be ready.

One of the things I wanted to ask you about especially given situations that have developed across the country, and you are starting to hear more and more law enforcement agencies and quite frankly, all businesses across all industries, partaking more and more on implicit bias training. Especially with this particular line of work—tactical, policing, SWAT teams, having to make decisions in an instant—how much of implicit bias training is that a role and what you all discuss as a part of your training? Do you encourage law enforcement agencies to enact some of that type of training to help them in these situations?

Eells

29:22

That's a great observation and the answer to that is yes. Several years ago, our association, the NTOA, started looking at these critical incidents and primarily focusing on decision-making and those three questions that I mentioned earlier. Trying to find the answers or trying to find meaning to an officer's decision-making as to why they did what they did when they did it. And singularly looking at, "What did you know at the very moment you made the decision to do X." And then from that, we started just looking at a lot of behavioral science and studying and reading that.

And in here the last probably eight months, we found and have worked with an organization from Posit Science called BrainHQ that focuses on neuroplasticity and literally brain science. How the brain functions. How is it that we observe things either through our sight or sound, any one of our five senses? And then how do we apply meaning to it, make a decision, and then take an action? And how do we do that in split seconds, milliseconds? And through BrainHQ, what we found is a lot of their training, it also assists and facilitates inhibition, impulse control.

And so, while I might have previously immediately responded to a certain stimuli without really given it much thought, because I felt like I had to for my safety, what you're able to do now is through this training, your brain is able to slow the same amount of information that you're receiving before. Slow it down, allow you to really consider everything, and then make a decision, and take an action. And that's what quite honestly, when we talk about implicit bias, and I don't mean to oversimplify that, because there's a lot of aspects to that, but that's actually what I would call functional realistic training.

Because I'm going to be honest with you, if you say to most officers, or most deputies, or most people involved in law enforcement, "Well, you're biased," they'll find that offensive. Because they've been treating people really pretty well for many, many years and they certainly don't think they're biased. And I'm not saying that there aren't bad apples out there, either. There may well be. I'll go so far as to say there certainly are and it's unfortunate.

Donelan

31:46

Right.

Eells

31:46

But the vast majority of the men and women that are in this profession are honorable, their intentions are noble, and they mean well. It doesn't mean they don't make mistakes, because we do all the time. But if we're able to find through your... And I love your emphasis on this education and training, but a way that we can train the brain that we can control our impulses, which might be biased, unknowingly biased, but nonetheless. And we can really consider the same information and do it more accurately, we're going to have better outcomes. And that's what our goal is and that's what we're working very aggressively in the NTOA in disseminating that training, because it's absolutely cutting edge.

Donelan

32:28

And quite frankly, it doesn't matter what type of venture you're doing, if you have that training licked, right? If you have that brain training, that ability to process information, literally, in an instance, and calm your brain down, and like, I've seen people do it, and I don't have that capability. My frontal lobe shuts down and I react, right? You say something, I'm like, "Ah!" But I've seen other people who have this sort of ability, quite frankly, and I know it all boils down to training to take the information and it's all in the blink of an eye—

Eells

32:59

Right.

Donelan

33:00

—ingest it and then decide what to do. That's what to me, implicit bias training is, right? Because we are all biased. I'm a person of biracial, you know, I'm very aware and I've always been aware of my biases. I know when I'm judging, right? And I stop myself. And I know that it is, when you say implicit bias training, the inference is, "Well, that means we're all racist." It doesn't mean anybody's racist. It doesn't mean anybody's prejudiced. It means that we all have these certain thoughts that for whatever reason we've had, right? I think things that are red are hot. That's a bias against things that are red, right? That means I automatically assume something that's red is hot. It doesn't mean everything that's red is hot, but it's that ability to train my brain to when I see something, right, not to assume it's going to be hot, right?

Eells

33:43

Exactly.

Donelan

33:43

It's a really oversimplified example, but I think that's really enlightening.

Eells

33:48

Yeah.

Donelan

33:48

And really hopeful that the NTOA is looking at that level of training. Because when we talk about these different entries, no knock, knock, and call out, and you can go through all of them, that level of training to me seems to be the most critical.

Eells

34:02

Unquestionably. And the beauty of it, though, is it extends far beyond, you know, operations as complex as warrant service or hostage rescue or even active assailant. These skills that are developed through this training translate to just driving a patrol car while you're trying to listen to a police radio, looking at a mobile computer, and talking to your partner, and you're looking outside for criminal activity and not trying to crash the car. So, something as simple as that is improved and your ability if somebody is reaching for a cell phone in the car on a traffic stop, is it cell phone or is it a handgun? All these types of things are improved in terms of performance.

And you know, the best way I can equate it is to baseball. When a batter in professional baseball steps up to swing at a baseball, they have about literally a quarter of a second to decide if they're going to swing. And yet through this type of training, they're able to literally slow things down enough to decide whether they're going to swing or not. And that's what we want to transfer from that environment into the law enforcement environment, so that when officers are interacting or deputies are interacting with the public, whether it's a citizen contact and/or a criminal contact, they're able to process all that information the same way consistently with a high degree of accuracy. And then have, you know, the proper outcomes. That will absolutely be a game changer in the whole law enforcement profession.

Donelan

35:38

Exactly. And you just said it, it's not just down to tactical operations. It's down to, just like you said, riding around in that patrol car, doing 40 things at once because the technology is there now. We've got more technology than we've ever had, but we also now have all these different things we've got to pay attention to on top of just doing some good old policing and being able to be aware of what's happening in our surroundings, let alone inside our patrol car.

Eells

36:02

Yeah.

Donelan

36:03

I think that's really helpful. You know, for those who are in leadership and law enforcement—small department, large municipal department—when it comes to leadership command staff, what sort of training and/or resources do you offer to the leadership staff when it comes to specifically tactical operations and the training of your tactical officers?

Eells

36:24

Well, we have a number of options available to them. We have command classes, we have a SWAT Command 1, SWAT Command 2, which are designed to be command staff level officer training to give them familiarity with tactical operations to have a working understanding of what tactical teams can, cannot do. How case law influences decision making, how policies and procedure play a role, that type of thing.

And then we also have, as I mentioned earlier, it's called our Command College. So, our Command College is actually eligible for college credit at over 1,100 colleges and universities in the United States for either undergraduate or graduate-level credit. And it covers many of these same topics that I just mentioned. So, the command class is critical incident management, supervising patrol critical incidents—there are a number of components of this that fall under that umbrella that help leadership develop some degree of understanding about how these incidents might unfold, what are some of their priorities, and how do they manage their limited resources, how do they expand their access to various resources, things of that nature.

Unfortunately, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that what we really need to be focusing on is simple attendance to this type of training is not enough. You need to engage in some regular practice, recertification, so that you develop some true level of competency and proficiency. And you are very insightful in noting that, you know, what are standards? And what levels of measurement do we have that we're able to actually truly perform what we've learned? And those are really lacking, and I think my recommendation to the leadership is just because you've been there does not make you a master. And learn who within your agency really has mastered some of this and then develop that trust and use them most appropriately when you need them the most.

Donelan

38:32

So, you'd had a 30-year career in law enforcement?

Eells

38:35

Yes, I'd spent 30 years in a large agency and worked all aspects of the job. Everything from patrol investigations and a lot of it in tactical.

Donelan

38:45

And I'm sure you've seen a lot change in 30 years.

Eells

38:49

An awful lot. And most of it for the better.

Donelan

38:52

Where do you think we're heading? Like, I know that if anything, there have been some horrible situations that have sparked great debates. I think everyone's looking inwards and saying, "Alright, what are we doing? What do we need to be doing? What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong? How do we get better? How do we increase our community relations?" I think that is a huge piece, right? It's a huge piece of it all.

But in terms of where we're going, and you just really laid it out earlier in the conversation, about how this particular, it's not an industry, but this particular service, a community service to protect and serve, preservation of life really doesn't have national standards. And I'm sure that's going to be a whole another debate and a whole another topic for a show that we'll have at some point. But when we look at just tactical operations, and we're talking about all the varying differences between different law enforcement agencies without those standards, do you think that at some point we need to be A) are we discussing them at all, and B) do you think that that might be a place where we're heading or you don't see it on the horizon? Your personal opinion.

Eells

39:54

My personal opinion is being discussed in some small circles relatively quietly. There is a lot of opposition to standards and, unfortunately, this might be upsetting to some of the listeners. You know, particularly if they're in leadership; a lot of the opposition is from law enforcement leadership. Police chiefs and sheriffs don't want standards and mandated training and things of that nature, because it places a lot of limitations on them when there are so many competing interests, and they have very finite resources and budgets. And so, that creates a lot of consternation for them and I fully appreciate that.

But I think we're at a very precarious moment in law enforcement as a whole in terms of how we're going to be effectively serving our communities, given a lot of the criticism and the, you know, the movements that are about, which aren't totally without merit. I mean, I think to some extent there's a lot of extreme overreaction and things of that nature, but unfortunately I would say law enforcement leadership as a whole has been very, very quiet at a time when they should have been very, very vocal. And being more upfront about where our limitations lie, and what has played a role in creating some of these limitations.

I mean, we are quite honestly very, very overstretched and under-resourced for what everybody wants law enforcement to be able to do. And hence, that conundrum of, you know, “What do I do with my limited training dollars? Do I train for an active assailant or do I train for elderly abuse and how to identify that? Or human trafficking?” Or you pick the topic of the day, but those aren’t infinite funds and you don’t have an infinite number of people to be able to put on the streets while you’ve taking others off the streets to go to the training. And so, you can see how this really becomes sort of this circular argument that it’s very, very difficult to break.

But I do believe that we have to reevaluate how we spend a lot of our time in training. A lot of that starts at the training academies. The truth of the matter is, if you look at the curriculum of a training academy from a law enforcement agency today, it’s not much different than it was 40 or 50 years ago. And as you remarked earlier, things are very, very different today than they were 40 or 50 years ago. The expectations of the public are different; case law is different; technology is different, so there’s a lot of reasons that we should probably be policing differently.

And whereas an academy of old is probably, oh, say somewhere in the 60- to 70-percentile range, very heavily skills based, I would flip that and take that 60 or 70 percent and make that more decision-making based and focus more of our energy there, so that we have people that really think well and perform well under stress. And I think we’re going to have better outcomes that way. It’s definitely a trying time right now.

Donelan

43:01

And quite frankly, the best time to be having uncomfortable conversations, right? Because we’ve got to get to a place where we are comfortable. And I think to get there, the only path is discomfort. And I think that the National Tactical Officers Association is dealing with some of the most stressful aspects of policing scenarios that these officers are facing, so you’re at a wonderful place to start. And it really is uplifting to know that this training is available. Officers and law enforcement departments are not on their own by any stretch of the imagination. I know you represent 40,000 tactical officers. So, from where I sit in the conversation like this, future looks good.

Eells

43:38

Well, I appreciate it. I mean, I totally agree with you that we have to have the conversations and they’re not always easy, but they’re absolutely necessary.

Donelan

43:46

Absolutely agree with you. So, I can’t thank you enough for spending this time with us. You’ve given us so much to think about, so much to talk about. And I’m not a betting woman, but I’m going to bet this particular episode is going to cause people to talk and I love that. So, if someone wants to get in touch with you to learn more about the NTOA, about the training you offer, or you know, just want to pick your brain, can they get in touch with you? And how so?

Eells

44:09

Yeah. Absolutely. So, the best way to learn more about the NTOA is probably to direct folks to our website, which is www.ntoa.org, O-R-G, so very easy. It has all of our information about the history of the NTOA, the courses that we offer, conferences, webinars—a variety of means in which they can gain information and increase their knowledge base. If anybody would like to reach me directly, my email is T-E-E-L-L-S-at-N-T-O-A-dot-org. [TEells@ntoa.org]

Donelan

44:45

Thank you so much for that, and we want to thank you so much for spending some time with us here on *The Beat*. And thank you for your more than 30 years of service and your continued service through your leadership with NTOA. And I just want to thank all of our listeners, as always, for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Eells

45:03

Thank you so much.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

45:05

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

46:02

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