



# Innovators

Winners of the L. Anthony Sutin Civic Imagination Award

## REDUCING CRIME BY INCREASING TRUST IN AN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

by Nazmia E.A. Comrie and Faye Elkins

One of the most divisive issues in American society today is immigration. It is front and center in national political debate and a growing focus for federal policy and regulation. Yet many who debate such big issues have little or no on-the-ground experience. They neither witness nor understand the complexity, challenges, and negative consequences of enforcing these laws through local law enforcement.

An often overlooked aspect of immigration enforcement is how difficult it is for law enforcement personnel—who have daily interactions with undocumented immigrants and are sworn to serve and protect *all* members of their community—to fulfill their duties while upholding laws that often undermine the trust and cooperation that supports effective policing.

Performing this delicate balancing act successfully requires innovative ideas, vision, courage, and collaboration. These traits characterize the remarkable efforts of the 2013 winners of the L. Anthony Sutin Civic Imagination Award: Dwight E. Henninger, police chief of the Vail (Colorado) Police Department, and Megan McGee Bonta, regional coordinator at Catholic Charities.

### Upholding immigration laws and public safety

Working together, Chief Henninger and Ms. Bonta reduced crime and increased community trust; advanced civil rights; and promoted a strong, peaceful immigrant community while also upholding enforcement laws. They achieved this by forming the Eagle County Law Enforcement Immigration Advisory Committee (LEIAC) and the simultaneous launch of the Eagle County Law Enforcement Immigrant Advisory Initiative in 2009.

Like a growing number of communities across the United States, Vail had become home to a large immigrant community, a situation made more challenging by a 2006 Colorado law, recently repealed, that required police to report suspected illegal immigrants they had arrested to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Immigration

and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which enforces federal laws governing border control, customs, trade, and immigration. However, many of those arrested were guilty only of minor offenses. In addition, some state legislators wanted local police to enforce immigration laws more aggressively: e.g., punishing those who hire undocumented workers and requiring schools to track students' immigration status.

Sworn to uphold the law but aware of the negative impact these mandates could have on his agency's efforts to protect all members of the community, Chief Henninger said in 2006 that if the Vail Police Department were compelled to become an enforcer of these immigration laws, it would have a chilling effect on undocumented residents.<sup>1</sup>



## Addressing the negative impacts of immigration enforcement

“The last thing I want,” said Chief Henninger, “is for people here illegally being afraid to call us and report that they’ve been victimized. That basic life safety issue is one of the tenets our country is founded on. Legal or not, you shouldn’t be beaten up or be the victim of domestic violence. We have to be willing to take care of those situations no matter a person’s status.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, just two years earlier when the children of an illegal immigrant were kidnapped in a small Colorado town, nobody in the community would help the police track down the kidnapper. According to local law enforcement, the suspect was an illegal immigrant, and those who knew him were not willing to cooperate because they too were undocumented and feared arrest.

The Eagle County Law Enforcement Immigrant Advisory Initiative provided the solutions for which Chief Henninger and Ms. Bonta had searched. LEIAC, originally comprising representatives from each local law enforcement agency and numerous immigrant advocates, has now expanded to include several public and private organizations, including neighboring law enforcement agencies, religious groups, Catholic Charities, the school district, the Salvation Army, victim services, and a private security firm, as well as representatives of the immigrant community.

## Language training, interpreters, and advocacy resources

LEIAC provides volunteer interpreters, outreach events, coat drives, resources, education, and information in both English and Spanish. This includes presentations, booklets, and surveys. The committee also sponsors training in both English and Spanish for officers and the immigrant community in communications, cultural norms, emergency services, immigration laws, and cultural differences. LEIAC programs, such as “Shop with a Cop” and a recently completed Spanish-based citizens’ police academy, has graduated more than 36 students to date. Because children are important social change agents, LEIAC offers programs that include them as well.



Photo: Justin McCarty

*The COPS Office honored the 2013 winners of the L. Anthony Sutin Award in April 2014 in Vail, Colorado. Attendees included (from left to right) Colorado U.S. Attorney John Walsh, COPS Office Director Ronald L. Davis, Chief Dwight E. Henninger and Megan McGee Bonta (the 2013 winners), and Vail Town Mayor Andy Daly.*

The agencies involved in the Immigrant Advisory Initiative offer case management and referral services, mediation assistance, civic workshops, and advocacy on the immigrant’s behalf to ensure the protection of their rights.

## Significant reduction in crime and increase in reporting

The committee and the initiative have resulted in remarkable accomplishments, including an increase in the reporting of crime by immigrant community members and an overall reduction in the percentage of immigrants victimized by crime.

Since LEIAC’s formation, crime reporting by the Hispanic community in Eagle County, as compared to the total service population, has increased from 5.4 percent in 2010 to 7 percent in 2011 and 7.9 percent in 2012. The percentage of Hispanics arrested, as compared to the total service population, has decreased from 41.9 percent in 2010 to 37.5 percent in 2011 and 33.1 percent in 2012. Moreover, the percentage of Hispanics victimized by a crime, as compared to the total service population, temporarily increased from 22.2 percent in 2009 to 24.6 percent in 2011 before sharply decreasing to 19.4 percent in 2012.

In an effort to maintain these trends, Chief Henninger and Ms. Bonta have continued their support, which includes speaking at events and in the media about immigrants’ vulnerability to crime and exploitation, both inside and out of their community. In addition, the partnerships they

developed for a broad-based coalition have strong buy-in from all levels of law enforcement. Other communities are now replicating these partnerships.

## Nobody should have to be a victim

“These are pretty exciting things, that people are comfortable reporting crimes to law enforcement without fear of deportation or that the victim might have to interact with our federal immigration authorities,” said Chief Henninger.<sup>3</sup> “It doesn’t matter whether they’re here legally or illegally, they should not have to be a victim.”

LEIAC’s success has been recognized by lawmakers throughout the state, including U.S. Senator Michael Bennet, who said, “Colorado’s communities are stronger when people like Chief Henninger and Megan [McGee Bonta] are working together to create safe and inviting places to live.”<sup>4</sup> A member of the Group of Eight, which drafted the Senate’s landmark bipartisan immigration bill in 2013, Bennet worked to include provisions that would support integration efforts similar to those in Eagle County.

As the national debate rages on, Eagle County law enforcement and the immigrant community it serves continue to build trust, develop strong relationships, and increase safety for all. These were L. Anthony Sutin’s goals, which the COPS Office supports by recognizing innovative, collaborative, and humane solutions to our nation’s challenges through the award named in his honor.

## Endnotes

1. Alex Miller, “Immigration Proposals Flop among High Country Leaders,” *Summit Daily News*, January 12, 2006, <http://www.summitdaily.com/news/5187932-113/news-none>.
2. Ibid.
3. Vivian Gatica, “Committee Builds Trust between Law Enforcement and Immigrants,” *New Frontier Chronicle*, February 12, 2014, <http://www.newfrontierchronicle.org/colorado-initiative/>.
4. “Henninger, Bonta Honored for Community Collaboration,” *Vail Daily*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.vaildaily.com/news/announcements/11064405-113/community-enforcement-immigrant-law>.

## THE L. ANTHONY SUTIN CIVIC IMAGINATION AWARD



### About this series

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) presents the Innovators series, which honors the winners of the annual L. Anthony Sutin Civic Imagination Award. The winners comprise a collaborative team of law enforcement and community members whose innovative civic interactions have transformed public safety in their community.

The winning team creates sustainable collaborations that are innovative, creative, and transformative; displays civic leadership through problem solving and collaborative partnerships; institutionalizes sustainable, positive, observable public safety outcomes; and promotes public safety through dedication to the community policing philosophy.

The award is named in memory of Tony Sutin, who served as a founder and deputy director of the COPS Office from its creation in 1994 until 1996 when he became the principal deputy to the associate attorney general of the United States. He then served as acting assistant attorney general for legislative affairs before joining the faculty of the Appalachian School of Law in Grundy, Virginia, in 1999. He quickly became dean and served in this capacity until his untimely death on January 16, 2002. A distinguished graduate of Harvard Law School and former partner of the law firm Hogan & Hartson in Washington, D.C., Tony was widely known and respected for his brilliant intellect, quiet wit, and tremendous commitment to service and community. It is with great admiration and respect for Tony's many contributions to the COPS Office and the principles of community policing that the COPS Office named this award in his memory.

For information on nominations, visit the COPS Office's L. Anthony Sutin Civic Imagination Award web page at <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=2587>.



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