

Constitutional Policing: Organizational Values

Voiceover:

00:00

This is *The Beat*—a podcast series that keeps you in the know about the latest community policing topics facing our nation.

Nazmia Comrie

00:08

Hello and welcome. My name is Nazmia Comrie and on behalf of the COPS Office, I'd like to introduce you to Chief Scott Thomson of the Camden County Police Department. Chief Thomson is here today to discuss Constitutional policing. Chief Thomson, Camden city's shootings are down 43 percent in two years and violent crime down 22 percent. What do you attribute to your success?

Chief Scott Thomson

00:30

What we've been able to do over the last two years was to leverage the greatest force multiplier that we have in reducing crime. And it's not technology, it's not equipment, and it's not training—it's to be able to empower and get the people to come out of their homes to occupy their neighborhoods, their streets. And we had tipping points in public safety wherein we'll have more good people on the street than we will have bad people that are out there. For far too long, the people in the city of Camden have been held hostage in their own homes. They've had to look out the bars on their windows and watch criminals and drug dealers operate with absolute impunity in their neighborhoods, which has negatively defined the lives of people that live there on that street. But when we deployed walking beat officers that literally were going up and down the block during daylight hours knocking on the doors, introducing themselves to the people that lived in the neighborhood, asking them what were the issues that were negatively defining their lives for the last multiple years, and how can we work with you to address those issues—when we started to do that, what we found were that people came out from behind their doors, sat on their front steps, allowed their children to play out and ride their bikes in the street. And not only did it enhance the communication of neighbor to neighbor, but it greatly enhanced the communication between the community and the police.

Comrie

02:00

Thank you. How have you been able to engage a community that has a history of mistrust toward the police?

Thomson

02:07

Well, we've certainly had our challenges in the city of Camden. Over my course of years with the Camden City Police Department, we had put over 11 officers in jail. There was a point and time when we put five officers in federal prison for a series of violations of the law and the public's mistrust. So when

we started our new police department on May 1, 2013, we were starting in a deficit with regards to how the community viewed people that were charged with protecting and serving them. So to bridge this gap as quickly as possible, we employed tactics and strategies that enhanced—in fact, in some regards, mandated—human contact, interaction between the officers and the people. The only way I could get cops to truly empathize with the people that lived in the neighborhood and get the people that live in the neighborhood to truly trust our officers, was to have as much human contact and interaction as possible. So we deployed those types of strategies and techniques, and it worked tremendously. The people that live on the streets, when they saw our officers engaging the children out in front in foot races and push up competitions, playing—our cops were the steady quarterbacks in the street games of football, basketball leagues—particularly through the youth, we were able to build a tremendous amount of trust and good will with people in our city.

Comrie

03:36

And how has the culture of your department affected the way your officers interact with the community?

Thomson

03:41

Well, the impact on our culture has been just amazing. Now one, again, with the new police department, I have the luxury of building culture as opposed to the challenge of changing it. I can tell you, when I became chief of the Camden City Police Department in 2008 when I would require officers to get out of their squad cars and to walk down neighborhoods and talk to people, you know, that was against the status quo. That was not something that was routinely being done for quite some time and it just seemed to be outside of the mindset of many of the officers and even some of the good officers. But when we started the new police department, everybody came in with the understanding and expectation of what the mission was and the creed in which we would perform our mission.

So our mission in very simplest terms is to reduce the number of crime victims and to make people feel safer. Every member of my organization can recite that to you. And our creed, which is actually emblazoned on our badge and has been incorporated in our oath of office, is “service before self,” meaning we will subjugate our own needs for the greater good. So with this as the starting point and being able to have the officers engage with the people that live in some of the most challenged neighborhoods in this country, it really strengthened the empathy that needs to be there in the officer that’s working within that neighborhood. The officer needs to understand, and I believe that most of ours truly do, that we need the consent of the people for us to be efficient and effective and that the laws that are there for us to enforce are not for us to enforce on the people but to enforce with the people; meaning that we just don’t indiscriminately apply zero tolerance types of tactics and strategies. Right? Zero tolerance is zero common sense. And it immediately polarizes the people. As does the militarization of neighborhoods—taking a bunch of cops and putting them in riot gear or putting a command post out on a corner and have officers walking around holding rifles—does not enhance people’s feeling of safety and well-being. In fact, it can have the complete opposite effect,

notwithstanding the fact that that tactic will essentially not have any violent crime occur while we're there, but it's not sustainable. So again, leveraging the greatest force multiplier there is which is the people themselves, when we're able to connect with them, the culture within the organization is that the officers understand that this is the absolute prerequisite to having safe, healthy communities, it gives us a tremendous, tremendous return on our investment and it makes our public safety gains that we have sustainable for the future.

Comrie

06:19

Thank you for your time and expertise today.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

06:22

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

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