

Gender Diversity in Policing

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 everyone and thank you for joining us on *The Beat*. I'm Jennifer Donelan, your host. We are at Howard University in the nation's capital at a forum discussing issues related to women in law enforcement and I have the sheer honor of being joined right now by Chief Vera Bumpers. Chief Bumpers was appointed as the first woman chief of police at METRO in Houston. She guides and leads the second largest transit law enforcement agency in Texas. Chief Bumpers, thank you so much for joining us.

Chief Vera Bumpers

00:53

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Donelan

00:56

Can you talk about gender diversity in law enforcement as a topic and what we'll be talking to our audience about today?

Bumpers

01:02

Right. Well, I think gender diversity is important. Uh, it's important because it's reflective of the communities that we serve. So I think our law enforcement agencies should, they should see someone on there that looks like them. So it's, I think we're doing a great disservice when we don't make an effort and be intentional about ensuring that we have diversity in our police departments. This is important whether you're a male leader or female leader. It's important for you to be intentional about having a diverse workforce.

Donelan

01:34

Let me take you back to the beginning. What inspired you to make the decision to pursue a, a career in law enforcement?

Bumpers

01:43

What inspired me um, goes way back. Um, I'm originally from Mobile, Alabama, but I grew up in San Antonio, Texas. And every year, my family would travel back from San Antonio to Alabama. And uh, we always braced ourselves because we knew at that time, we're talking about in the 60s, uh that we would be stopped, mainly for no reason, uh, we would uh often go to stop in locations to use the bathroom and they would tell my father, uh, no, he said, "Can my family use the restroom here?" "No they cannot."

And so this one particular incident, um, was my father was pulled over by a state trooper and I remember they went or had him open the trunk, took all of our stuff, threw it along the highway, and questioned my dad and just talked to him really ugly. Uh, we're all looking out the backseat. The windows are down. And uh, after they did all of that and couldn't find anything, they drove off.

Um, that, that really stuck with me. All the years we had traveled back and forth, I never questioned my dad. He'd get back in the car, even with the restroom issue, he said, we just, we'll find somewhere else. We'll drive somewhere else. But it was no discussion. My mom didn't say anything. Nobody said anything. In this particular time, as I watched my dad pick up all the stuff from the side of the highway, and uh, he got back in the car and I said, "Why do you keep allowing this to happen? Why do you let them do this? Why don't you say something?" And my dad said, "You don't understand. I have to protect my family." And that stuck with me. I have to do something because when he said, "You don't understand, I have to protect my family," then, who's gonna do something because that was my question to him? Why don't you do something?

And so I knew then that I wanted to help people. Um, my goal was to be a social worker and uh, some type of way the paths got crossed and I got into law enforcement.

I like to think about the good that can be done in this role and I've stressed that in my department now about being community servants and being servant leaders. I think it's important to be a servant leader. And so I push that um, with the officers and the personnel I work with now.

Donelan

03:57

You're inspired by your experiences, you take good from bad, and you decide that you want to enter into law enforcement, there's the African American experience but there's also the, the female experience. Did, at any point, did your gender, beyond your skin color, did your gender, 'cause you're entering into a male dominated field. Were there challenges being a woman?

Bumpers

04:23

Yes. There were a lot of challenges being a woman. Um, the agency when I started, I was the second female hired. And shortly after I started, the first female hired, she decided to go to law school so she quit the department. So I was the only female for a couple years.

Donelan

04:38

You were the only one?

Bumpers

04:39

Only one.

Donelan

04:40

Wow.

Bumpers

04:41

And so one of the things uh, my stature, I'm not very tall.

Donelan

04:45

Which agency is this by the way? Take us back.

Bumpers

04:47

It is the same one I'm with now.

Donelan

04:48

Same one? Okay.

Bumpers

04:48

And so um, I remember that um, the old cars, you know, before we had um separate seating, you know it was one seat and you'd have to pull the entire seat up. So none of the guys, uh, one guy, he always uh, he was training me and he just gave me a hard time. All the time he just talked bad, you know and I wouldn't say anything. I was young, I was new, I was just like, okay, I'm gonna just go with the program. And uh, this particular day, he said, "I'm tired of chauffeuring you around. You think you're a queen? You think you're somebody special?" I didn't say anything. He said, "You're driving today." And in my mind, I'm thinking, "Okay good." So when I, we switched seats and I pulled the seat all the way up where his knees were in his chin (laughing). So he said uh, you know, we're driving, I could see he was uncomfortable. He said, "Pull over. Pull over." And then so I stopped. I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Get out." And so we switched seats. And he never brought that up again.

Donelan

05:40

How did you overcome those challenges?

Bumpers

05:42

It was going through all that. It was my dad again. Um, I would call him and I said, "You know, I can't do this job." Because at that time I was the only woman. I said, "I just can't do this job." Um, I said, "Can you please come get me? Help me pack and move back?" He said, "You'll be fine. Hang in there. You can do it." I'd call him again, he said, "I'm busy. I'll, let me call you back." (laughing). We have a bad connection.

Donelan

06:05

Right. I can't hear you.

Bumpers

06:06

So uh, from that, you know, I finally, I went to the guy who had really was the one that recruited me there. And so I talked, went to talk to him. He was my friend and we had uh went to college together. And so I told him, I said, "Look, these guys are giving me a hard time. I just can't do this." And he said, "You'll be fine." I wanted him to intervene and help me. I wanted him to ride in on that horse—

Donelan

06:30

Right.

Bumpers

06:31

And say, "Hey, leave her alone."

Donelan

06:32

Right.

Bumpers

06:32

He said, "You'll be fine." And I made a decision because obviously they saw potential in me that I didn't see in myself. And I said, "I'm gonna stay here and I'm gonna be the best officer I can be." Because I was applying at other jobs, nothing was opening up. I decided to invest in myself going to conferences uh, reading, uh signing up for courses, and I was doing this on my own. I didn't, I never asked the department.

Donelan

06:59

As a woman um, take us through your career path through the, through the um, agency. But then the things that you did that moved you forward. I'm sure that there are those who look and say, "Well, she's a woman. They had to move a woman here. They had to move a woman there." I'm listening to you right now and I'm hearing all that elbow grease you put in so that you were qualified.

Bumpers

07:20

Yes. Yes and that's, that was my point. I wanted them to know, if I moved, it was gonna be because I was qualified. No other reason. And that I wanted them to see that I can do this job just like you can. Yeah, I may have to pull the seat up a little closer. I may even have to sit on a pillow, sometimes depending on how big the car is. But that, my stature has nothing to do with my qualifications. And I wanted them to understand beyond me, any woman that came through the door after me, it was because she was qualified. And so I believe that I had set the tone for all those women that would come behind me because they started to hire more women. And so I, I saw the attitudes change with a lot of the men. And where even I had a voice, even before I became a supervisor, where they had started coming to me and saying, "What do you think about this?" Because they did not know, even when I went back to get my masters, I said nothing to anyone. I quietly did my thing behind the scenes to prepare myself because when my name was called, I wanted to be ready.

And I'd also like to mention NOBLE. National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives. Currently I am the first National Vice President. I will ascend to the presidency in July 2018.

Donelan

08:35

Oh wow. Congratulations to you.

Bumpers

08:36

Yes. So it's exciting.

Donelan

08:38

And can you tell people what NOBLE is?

Bumpers

08:39

NOBLE is a national organization where we have members from throughout the United States from law enforcement agencies. Um, it's really, it was designed for lieutenants and above um, we're over 40 years now. But we do allow sergeants, officers, civilians, uh support personnel to be a part of the organization. I think uh NOBLE is really one of the organizations that was huge in my career coming up. I joined as a sergeant and just to go to the conferences and see the leaders in the room. See the leaders in the

hallways. Uh, it was just powerful to hear their testimonials and hear how their insight and what they were doing to lead their organizations. It just built something up. It fired me up every year when I would go and I'd come back just telling everybody about just the experience I had. Because at that time, you didn't really get to see leadership that looked like you.

Donelan

09:36

Mm-hmm.

Bumpers

09:37

So to see that, it was powerful. But beyond that, it's just not for African Americans, we have members of all races. And we are very inclusive in that. But the National website has all the information on chapters as well as what's going on in the regions and at the national office.

Donelan

09:54

And what's the website?

Bumpers

09:55

It's uh, noble.org. National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives.

Donelan

10:00

What specific obstacles are there for women in law enforcement? But then I also want to talk about um, the opposite. The things that are really there that, that we, that women might not think about that should be a draw for them in law enforcement. But what would you say would be specific obstacles for women or perceived obstacles for women in law enforcement and wanting to follow that path?

Bumpers

10:22

One of the things that I've noticed is that balancing the family with the children. You know, mom is the one, she's the go-to person in the home. So for women who may have children, women who are thinking about one day wanting to get married and have children, and in law enforcement, it's a 24/7 job and there's shift working. You know you come in um, you have to pay your dues and maybe work those shifts with the, where you don't have weekends off. It's finding those things to show them that there can be balance. That there are many departments now that are uh, exploring having daycares at the department.

Donelan

10:56

Oh, that's wonderful.

Bumpers

10:57

I sat down with a young lady who had, she had just had a baby and I had to change her schedule where she would be working at nights. And so when I made the schedule change, I saw her, she looks really strange. And then she came, she said, "Can I talk to you?" And I said, "Sure." And she came in and she just started crying. She said, "My baby, what about my baby?" I said, "Lets, let's talk this through." So I start throwing out suggestions. We left that meeting and she was very appreciative. But she said it's just things she had not thought about. And I think once women understand that they can do this job and balance and have a family, have the personal time, uh, and how rewarding being a part of uh, a public servant is, a rewarding profession and I still think it's one of the most noble professions.

Donelan

11:40

Well, and you said at the beginning that um, you know, it really requires all to be at the table so that we're making the best decisions.

Bumpers

11:50

Right.

Donelan

11:51

Um, what, what is the draw for women in law enforcement? What would you say to women that you might not realize, but once you're on this side, you get to effect this? Instead of obstacles, what would you say are the positives?

Bumpers

12:02

I think the positives is just probably what some of them do already if you're engaged with your child at your school and you love working with young people, you have that opportunity to do that in law enforcement. If you want to see change even with our senior people, you have opportunity to do that. You have that authority to do things that most people would not be able to do. And you can do it in a positive way where it's not a negative. You may have an opportunity to talk to one young person who made a bad decision that you have the option whether you take them to jail or not. But you may be that one voice that turns their life around.

Donelan

12:39

Sure.

Bumpers

12:40

And so I always try to encourage people to say, "We all have an obligation to impact the next generation." Uh, we all have an obligation to be positive influence in our area, in our communities. No matter what we do but why not do it with a uniform on? I always said, "No one can stand in the street and stop an 18-wheeler except someone with a uniform and a badge." (laughing).

Donelan

13:07

I like that (laughs). From your perspective and experience, what, what have you seen change? What has changed for women since you entered law enforcement?

Bumpers

13:16

I think the respect of uh, our counterpart, our man counterparts, uh colleagues. Um, you see now where there are more women who are chiefs of police. It seems like every week, popping up there's another female chief of police. We're not really focusing on the fact that we're female, but we're focused on the fact that we're professionals. And we're here to lead an organization in a productive way. It's nothing more rewarding than that as a leader, to know that those who are following, respect you and respect what you do and consider you professional. And I always tell people that uh, as a leader, if you think you're a leader, nobody's following you, you're just out for a long walk.

Donelan

14:10

What do you see as a way forward to uh promote gender diversity in law enforcement overall?

Bumpers

14:15

I think that those who are not in the profession but still have some ties to it, can promote it also. It's beyond just us wearing the uniform. But it's those persons, the teachers telling students when they go to career fairs or when they're talking, have you ever considered a career in law enforcement, inviting us in to talk to the students. I think this will be a conversation that goes well beyond the four walls of our departments and one of the things that I try to do is engage. But I think we have to get out more. We have to be intentional about going into the communities, to the schools, to the churches, to talk to young people and uh, even talking to those who may say, "I'm ready for another career."

Donelan

15:00

Do you have any final thoughts for our listeners about, and, and, you know, they're going to be police executives listening to this and other officers. Any, any final thoughts as we all move forward to um, um, trying to increase diversity overall in law enforcement?

Bumpers

15:14

I, I would say um, especially to those who are uniform personnel that I thank them for their service. Every opportunity I get, I thank the men and women who protect us every day in our communities. Uh, we don't always say thank you or we'll wait till police week to say it. Or when something happens to an officer. But I really thank them for their service and sacrifice. And I thank the families. Because your family has to support you. And I always say, we don't want to invest more in this profession than we do in our families because it has to, we have to put just as much because they're there, they're worried about you, they're sacrificing, they know you're out there it almost feels like they're out there.

And I would say uh, don't ever get to a point where you can't reach back and help somebody else. Um, I tell them, if the elevator gets you to the top where you succeeded to those ranks of uh, uh leadership, make sure you send the elevator back for someone else. And you sow into someone else's life. Um, because it's about us continuing to build people of empowerment and those who are professional and those who want to make a difference in our communities. You know, our youth depend on us making sure that we have qualified, committed law enforcement officers.

Donelan

16:25

Chief Bumpers, thank you so much for joining us.

Bumpers

16:29

Thank you for having me.

Donelan

16:31

And thank you, audience for listening to *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

16:33

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

17:33

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