

## **Civilian Oversight of the Police in Los Angeles: Collaboration, Activism and Outreach.**

### **Testimony of Charlie Beck, Chief of Police, Los Angeles Police Department.**

Commissioner Ramsey (Chuck), Dr. Robinson (Laurie), Ms. Rice (Connie) and distinguished members of the task force, I am pleased to be able to contribute to the discussion and debate on what I view as the most important issue facing law enforcement, our communities and in a broader sense, our society today- the issue of civilian oversight of the police.

We have seen situations throughout the Country where mistrust and resentment of the police have built up over generations. When a tragedy occurs, that deep-seated resentment coupled with a lack of transparency, candor and accountability sets off civil unrest as members of the community feel that they have no other recourse but to protest.

Once that protest starts, unless you have some connection to the community, unless you can demonstrate that you as a police department and as a city realize that “the People are the Police,” then all of the progress we have made can be erased in an overnight media cycle. And that is a chilling prospect.

“Policing cannot be judged only by an absence of crime, it must be measured by the presence of justice.”

As we have seen, it doesn't matter how low we push the crime rate if we don't build public confidence as we go. It is not enough for a modern police department to be effective in reducing crime year upon year, we must strive to build greater trust between the police and the people we are sworn to protect and serve.

We have had our share of protests in LA over the last few months, mostly peaceful, but we still face challenges. We have turned a time of crisis into an opportunity to engage in dialogue and to embrace new technology to foster trust and accountability. We have taken a hard, honest look at what we can do better in terms of evolving the culture of policing and improving and enhancing our training model...all done with an eye to building greater trust and better communication with the community.

A large part of building and maintaining the trust of the community lies in the ability of government to demonstrate transparency and accountability. The Los Angeles Police Department is formally governed by the Board of Police Commissioners, a five-person, civilian body with each member appointed by the Mayor. The Commission has formal authority to hire the Chief of Police, to set broad policy for the Department and to hold the LAPD and its Chief accountable to the people. This model has evolved since the Commission was founded in 1889 and now includes an active and meaningful exchange of ideas that fuels innovation and reform efforts.

In Los Angeles, we are fortunate enough to have a well-established civilian oversight system in place that not only sets broad policy and holds the Chief accountable but also encourages

collaboration. When it works, and I would argue that it is working in LA, civilian oversight comes down to COLLABORATION, ACTIVISM and OUTREACH.

## **Collaboration**

In Los Angeles civilian oversight differs from the traditional notions of a civilian review board, police auditor, or ombudsman approach. Civilian oversight means working collaboratively with the Mayor and City Council; the Board of Police Commissioners and the Inspector General; community groups, the media, and activists. It means working with police management, the rank and file and with our union.

As noted by the National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement in their recent testimony before this task force,

“civilian oversight provides a mechanism to bring together the many stakeholders involved in supporting trusted, respectful, and effective law enforcement efforts. Oversight breaks down the walls between police and the public and enhances their understanding of each other...”

That statement really gets to the heart of the matter. We recognize that respect and trust leads to effective policing. Collaboration rather than resistance is a powerful and worthwhile process and one of the keys to success in public safety and crime reduction.

Collaboration means embracing tough issues together and with a common purpose.

The best example of collaboration in the context of civilian oversight is the way in which the City of LA has approached the use of body worn cameras. A couple of years ago, before the recent high profile uses of force in Ferguson, New York and LA, the LAPD began looking at widespread implementation of body-worn cameras. Police Commission President Steve Soboroff recognized the importance of these devices for public safety and for citizen oversight and raised funds in 2013 from the private sector to purchase cameras. We began to test different models in earnest while our research partners applied for and received Federal funds from the National Institute of Justice to evaluate their use.

Our Mayor, Eric Garcetti, and City Council announced their intent to equip all of our officers with body worn cameras. The Police Commission reached out to community-based organizations and individuals to obtain their input about the cameras, and as recently as two weeks ago the LAPD, Police Commission, and Inspector General convened two special community meetings about policies related to on-body cameras. And this coming week we are meeting and conferring with the police union to discuss the policies that will affect our men and women on the street.

The collaboration around this issue speaks to the way civilian oversight is embedded in our normal business practices in Los Angeles. The community, the civilian board of police commissioners and the police department work together with our elected officials to implement meaningful reform. This doesn't mean that we always agree. In fact, it is during the times that we disagree that we make the most progress toward ongoing reform and communication.

It's easy to work with supporters, of whom we have many in Los Angeles, but it is often much more meaningful to actively engage with your detractors. Criticism, activism and engagement can lead to tremendous gains when it comes to public safety.

## **Activism**

So, in Los Angeles we are again fortunate to have individuals, organizations and political leadership that are willing to "dispute the passage," with us and to hold up a mirror to our operations for us to examine.

We've also found that working with activists directly reduces anxiety and anger. Recently, a local activist group concerned about officer-involved shootings had camped out in front of police headquarters. They were angry, frustrated and disenfranchised. On a number of occasions, members of the group violated the law and were arrested. The divide between these activists and the police was widening.

Then, at the groups urging and in collaboration with our City Council President, Herb Wesson, we took a meeting with their leadership. While we could not meet their direct demands due mainly to due process and legal constraints, we did enter into dialogue with the group and we even altered our enforcement posture in front of headquarters. In demonstrating a more open approach to their protest, we literally broke down the barriers between us by taking down the barricades in front of police headquarters. The meeting reduced the tension that had been mounting and the group ended up holding a closing ceremony to end their eight week protest.

During my career, I have had a long term and productive relationship with many activists and advocacy groups, including Connie Rice's **Advancement Project**. Connie went from suing the police department, quite regularly, on behalf of her clients to working hand in hand with us to improve conditions in some of our toughest neighborhoods.

Violence is down in these areas, and with time, our officers have realized the importance of what has been called "relationship policing." That relationship with Connie and with other local activists over time started to change our thinking. We began to see the value of embracing criticism and oversight and of just listening to another point of view.

## **Outreach**

The **Community Safety Partnership** is a good example of engaging the community and building trust where it is needed most, in the public housing projects in Watts. Instead of an invading army to suppress crime, we assigned 45 officers to serve for five years at three housing projects in Watts and at an additional housing project in East Los Angeles. Through a partnership with Advancement Project and the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, the program involves officers working side by side with residents and community members to develop and implement sustainable programs, eradicate crime, and address quality of life issues. But most importantly it bridges the gap between the community and the LAPD.

Relationship based policing is what the Community Safety Partnership is all about. People that have high levels of interaction with police want to have a relationship with the cops they deal

with. The officers go into the housing developments with the intent NOT to make arrests, but to create partnerships, create relationships, to hear the community and see what they need and then work together to make those things happen.

LAPD Captain Phil Tingirides and his wife Sergeant Emada Tingirides who spearheaded that program for the LAPD have been recognized for their unconventional collaborative outreach efforts by President Obama and both sat in Michelle Obama's box at the State of the Union Address this year.

## **Closing**

There is a divide in America today and much of it comes down to mistrust and a lack of understanding. In order to bridge that divide we as police leaders must fully embrace true and meaningful community oversight. We must not retreat and grow defensive in the face of criticism and conflict. We need to rise to the occasion, reach outside of our “command and control” comfort zone and develop new ways to connect to the people we police AND to our officers who are out there every day working to improve conditions and protect our communities.

The true spirit of meaningful civilian oversight of the police relies on **collaboration** among City leaders, dogged and determined **activism** and ongoing community **outreach**.

## **Recommendations**

1. Enhance police training and education
2. Introduce public education on police operations, like the Citizens Police Academy
3. Expand use of relationship policing model, like Community Safety Partnership
4. Formalize relations with activists and embrace community input
5. Leverage technology to build trust, like body-worn and in-car video cameras
6. Develop more research-based interventions for crime prevention
7. Implement data-driven performance measures that include community surveys