



1 Police Plaza
800 Federal Street
Camden, NJ 08103
(856) 757-7487
Chief@CamdenCountyPD.org

"Service Before Self"

Co-Chairs Commissioner Charles Ramsey and Laurie Robinson thank you for the invitation to provide testimony for the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

This is a watershed moment for American policing. **We must acknowledge the grievances of the public, take inventory of ourselves, be committed to redress, and invite the community to have a hand on the steering wheel as we seek a new destination.** If we assume a defensive stance and "circle the wagons" we risk losing the public's confidence.

Although extremely complex and saddled with negative history that cannot be ignored, our current dilemma isn't a Gordian knot. The starting point is on a city street corner with a respectful interaction between a police officer on the beat and a member of that community. These are the beginning variables in the equation of community policing. It is the most effective prescription to put us on the path of healing with our current affliction. It is how one of the country's most unhealthy cities rapidly reversed course and with each passing day has a more promising prognosis.

In 2012, Camden, NJ, a city of 77,000 people that is 96% minority had 67 murders. This city had the dubious distinction of the highest rates in the nation for crime, poverty, and single parent households. The murder rate was 17 times the national average, eclipsing even the most violent third world countries. Statistically speaking, it was arguably one of the most challenged cities in the United States of America.

On May 1, 2013, bold leaders from the city, county and state had the moral imperative to create a new police organization. Some forecasted the social problems which drove violence were too deeply rooted and intractable for the police to have a measurable impact on crime. We forged ahead knowing effective and sustainable public safety begins and ends with community policing.

Community policing cannot be a program, unit, strategy or tactic. It must be the core principle which lies at the foundation of a police department's culture. Community policing is not an option, it's an affirmative obligation.

The only way to significantly reduce fear, crime and disorder and then sustain these gains is to leverage the greatest force multiplier; the people of the community. When police empower neighbors to feel safe enough to leave their homes, communities begin to hit tipping points in public safety as far more good people than trouble makers occupy the streets. The opportunity for flagrant crimes to be committed is now greatly diminished.

So how do police get people to take that leap of faith and venture onto their front steps or walk down their streets where criminals seemingly operate with a sense of impunity? The answer in a single word is, TRUST. The public must TRUST its police. Police cannot afford to operate after-the-fact, attempting to solve crime seeking "just the facts". This trust is communicated through our actions and not words. The only way trust is gained and built upon is through constant human contact. Classroom training for cultural sensitivity is critical as a

starting point, but understanding and empathy of another is experientially learned. **Police interactions with the people of the community can not only be limited to 911 emergency calls or during an investigation for an infraction of the law.** This must not be the lens through which we view and experience each other. Our contact must be consistent with concern, yet respectful and knowledgeable to people's right to ignore or decline interaction to non-investigatory dialogue. American cities will never be made safer through police tactics akin to militarization.

As little as 24 months ago, Camden had over 175 flagrant open air drug markets within its 9 square miles. Historically, we would attempt to arrest our way through this problem; ultimately causing more harm than repair and never achieving our objective. But now we've embraced our role as guardians and prevent drug dealing through walking beats and bicycle patrols. Soon parents let children play in front of their houses. Corners that once held narcotic buyers and sellers are now home to pickup games of street ball, foot races, and pushup competitions between the neighborhood cop and the kids. **The community is safer through less incarceration as we view handcuffs as a tool of last resort.**

When police are immersed in the community with constant dialogue and communication, we quickly learn of the issues that matter most to them. The problems that have been negatively defining their lives for years can be addressed in a meaningful way. **Police are must enforce the law with the people and not unilaterally upon them.**

This cannot be performed with a "zero-tolerance" mentality, nor ignoring the tenets of procedural justice and legitimacy. The community with whom we interact with are deserving of an explanation of our actions. Officers must be routinely trained and made aware of traditional habits that, albeit lawful, aggravate and drive apart community relations. Just because we can, doesn't always mean we should. **Procedural justice and police legitimacy should be integrated in the core curriculum at all police training academies and departmental in-service training.**

When violent crime escalates, police must proceed with a laser like focus on the criminals responsible and not broadly upon the community in which the crimes are occurring. **Law enforcement must smartly transition from "Hot Spots" to "Hot People".** In laymen's terms, *we must fish with a spear and not a net.* The importance of this cannot be overstated and is central to most of the contention between minority communities and the police. Far too often, after an incident of violence, anxiety runs high bracing for the "protection" and heavy handed enforcement tactics that will soon sweep through their neighborhoods. **The police re-victimization polarizes the people we are trying to safe guard, while creating the concoction for a flash point.**

Last summer, Camden began to see the fruits of our outreach in a neighborhood that has historically high levels of gun violence and mistrust of the police. Then we experienced a spate of gang shootings. The fragility of our gains was evidenced by the immediate retraction of people back into their homes. So we took a different approach that was far more effective, cost efficient, and was a human investment that would return significant peace dividends. We hired Mr. Softee trucks onto the same street corners, giving away free cones of ice cream. The sweltering summer streets were immediately flooded with children and parents who connected with their neighborhood cop like never before. The sounds of gunshots and sirens were replaced with laughter and conversation; key ingredients in the recipe for trust.

Evidence based research, training, technology and intelligence has better educated and equipped today's police leaders to avoid the common pitfalls of the past. **Police must pivot from ineffective and damaging tactics to strategies that are work.** Anything less is policing malpractice.

Although we still have a lot more work to do, the progress thus far in Camden has been extremely promising. In less than 2 years, murders have been reduced by more than half. But more important than crime statistics is the enhanced sense of safety reported by our residents, business owners, visitors and children. The change is visceral. Most notable is a recent follow-up survey of middle school students that reported significantly feeling safer walking to and from school. Not coincidentally, test scores have increased as well. A rising tide lifts all boats.

The keystone to community policing is the interaction between the officer and neighborhood resident. Placing a badge upon one's chest does not inoculate them from the human conditions of bias, temper, vice, etc... . **Officers must be closely mentored, coached and monitored through training, supervision, and early warning systems.** If we frequently calibrate their moral compass and refine their interpersonal skills it's mutually beneficial in terms of health and safety for both officer and community. An E.W.S. is a safe guard to enable interventions before an issue becomes a crisis.

Finally, **it is critically important that police organizations do not solely measure their effectiveness by traditional outputs such as the Uniformed Crime Reports, arrests, tickets issued or people detained.** People measure safety by their ability to enjoy their front steps, walk to the corner store for a gallon of milk or allow their children to ride their bikes on the street.

In summation, here are the recommendations from the lessons learned in the transformation of Camden that apply to any challenged community:

- ✓ Building Trust between community and police is essential
- ✓ Police must interact with the community more than in times of crisis
- ✓ Arrest and incarceration need to be tools of last resort
- ✓ Procedural justice and police legitimacy must be core curriculum in an officer's training
- ✓ Focused deterrence lessens community victimization
- ✓ Ensure officer health/safety through mentoring, monitoring, and supervision
- ✓ The community's sense of safety is more valuable than statistical outputs

Thank you,

Police Chief J. Scott Thomson,

Camden County Police Department