

**Testimony by Chuck Wexler, Executive Director
Police Executive Research Forum
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**POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM**

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my perspectives on the important mission of the Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

For more than 20 years I have served as executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), which is a research and policy organization based in Washington, DC, dedicated to advancing the profession of policing. PERF is also a membership organization of police chiefs and others with an interest in policing.

Each year, PERF conducts research projects on the most important issues in policing. For example, in December PERF and the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) convened a meeting in Washington, DC of more than 60 police chiefs and other officials to discuss emerging issues with respect to ensuring constitutional policing. PERF also recently released recommendations for deploying body-worn camerasⁱ, and has conducted research on legitimacy and procedural justiceⁱⁱ in policing.

You have asked me to focus my testimony on building trust and collaboration between police executives, police labor leaders, and elected officials. When we talk about improving policing, the relationship between labor and management is an area that has been neglected for too long. And as recent events have shown us, everyone loses when these leaders fail to work together—especially people in the community and the officers on the streets.

Historically, labor and management have often viewed each other with suspicion. It often has seemed that they see each other as warring factions and treat each other as the enemy. In some cases, police unions were created in response to poor practices and working conditions that existed in police departments. Even as unions continued to grow, management often made changes to policy without labor's input. The unions responded by openly opposing changes, and the cycle of distrust continued.

Fortunately, this way of thinking is beginning to change. The new model for labor/management relations puts an emphasis on finding common ground, so that we can work together to achieve goals that we all share—protecting and serving the community more effectively, promoting officer safety and wellness, and building better police departments.

Although we have not always seized opportunities to collaborate, we must do so now. We must leave mistakes of the past behind, and move forward in our way of thinking.

Labor and management leaders still may not always agree on everything. And they may disagree sometimes with actions taken by the elected officials in their communities. But when these leaders disagree, it is important to treat each other with respect, to have open communication, and to bring everyone to the table.

With support from the COPS Office, PERF has held a series of productive Roundtable Discussions over the past several years with police executives and labor leaders to explore ways

they could better collaborate. The most recent of these meetings was convened earlier this month in Washington.

As an example of what can be accomplished when labor and management work together, at a Roundtable Discussion last November, police and labor leaders reached a groundbreaking agreement that calls upon all law enforcement agencies to adopt mandatory policies requiring officers to wear body armor and vehicle seatbelts.ⁱⁱⁱ This agreement addresses the concerns of both labor and management and represents an important step in protecting officer safety. Because of this unprecedented agreement, lives will be saved. We especially recognize the Fraternal Order of Police and the National Association of Police Organizations, whose leadership on this issue was critical to reaching this important agreement.

And at the most recent Roundtable Discussion, the conversation focused on fundamental strategies that police executives, labor leaders, and elected officials can employ to improve trust and collaboration with one another. Following this meeting, we also talked to several mayors to get their perspectives.

Thanks to these discussions, we were able to reach an agreement on the key principles that are critical for improving trust and collaboration among police, labor, and elected leaders.^{iv} We call upon leaders across the country to commit to adopting these principles as they work to build relationships with one another.

Today I would like to share several success stories from places where police executives and labor leaders have worked together to find common ground. In many of these places, elected leaders have played a key role in taking positive steps towards change.

As these stories show, when leaders work together it can lead to real progress: safer communities; police departments that are operating effectively; officers who are professional, diverse, and satisfied in their jobs; and ultimately stronger relationships between labor and management, and between police and their communities.

Leaders should focus on finding common ground: One key to building trust and collaboration is for leaders to focus on the goals and priorities they have in common, rather than on their differences or individual interests.

This is the approach taken by labor and management leaders in Prince George's County, Maryland. They enjoy a strong working relationship, in part because they share a common view of the direction the department should take. Although they may disagree on specific issues, they choose to build upon their commonalities and stand together publicly.

In Prince George's County, officer safety and wellness are viewed as a joint effort between labor and management. After a car accident claimed the life of a Prince George's County officer, the police chief and union president joined together to enact mandatory seatbelt policies and implement "Arrive Alive," a campaign to improve seatbelt compliance. Sitting side-by-side, the police chief and union president filmed a video emphasizing seatbelt safety.

Focusing on shared goals is critical to building better police departments. For example, police, labor, and elected leaders often agree that it is important to build a workforce that reflects the diversity of the community. In many places, leaders have begun working together to explore promising strategies for improving hiring diversity, such as targeted recruiting and outreach to minority communities, a diverse recruitment staff, and mentoring programs.

Finding common ground can also help strengthen relationships between police and the community. For example, many unions facilitate community outreach programs, and these efforts are more effective when they have the support of management. And in places like Racine, Wisconsin and Gary, Indiana, mayors are working with police chiefs to expand community policing to help officers better relate to the people they serve.

Leaders should engage in open communication and seek input from each other: Communication and transparency are key to building trust and good relationships. This means meeting frequently, sharing information, being transparent about decisions, engaging each other in the decision-making process, and seeking to build personal connections with one another.

In Sacramento, California, where labor and management enjoy a good relationship with each other and with local elected officials, the police chief and union president have a standing monthly meeting—usually over a meal, which they find to be more personal and helpful. Both also regularly have one-on-one meetings with the mayor.

Effective communication also means that leaders should engage in ongoing dialogue about how they will handle officer-involved incidents, rather than waiting until after the incident takes place. For example, the mayor in Little Rock, Arkansas, stresses that it is important that he and the police chief discuss what steps they will take if an officer-involved shooting occurs, so that they can present a united, clear, and factual message about what happened.

And in places like Philadelphia, Sacramento, and Prince George’s County, management and labor leaders make it a practice to not enact any new policies or make public statements without first receiving input from each other. In Sacramento, the mayor’s office consults with the police department and union prior to making public statements that involve police. In Prince George’s County, no new policy or general order leaves the police chief’s office unless the union president has had a chance to see it and weigh in.

Communication strategies should be a part of standard training for officers, command staff, and labor leaders. We also recommend creating joint training opportunities for elected officials and police executives, as well as their communications staffs, to improve communications between each other and with the public.

Leaders should handle disagreements with respect and professionalism: Inevitably, there will be times when police executives, labor leaders, and elected officials disagree. When this happens, it is more important than ever to treat each other with respect. This means not taking differences personally, refraining from spreading rumors, and resolving disagreements privately rather than in public.

Although labor and management relations in Philadelphia have historically been contentious, the current police commissioner and union president have a good working relationship. They credit this to treating each other with respect, resolving problems behind the scenes, not taking disagreements personally, and avoiding spreading rumors through the press. They said they have been able to get more things done—such as securing pay raises for officers and implementing officer wellness programs—by working together than by constantly focusing on disagreements.

Treating each other with respect also means remembering that words matter—especially when they are spoken to the news media. When voicing concerns or expressing disagreement, leaders should avoid making negative generalizations or personal remarks. Such remarks damage relationships, officer morale, and the public’s perception of the police department.

The approach taken by the mayor in Gary, Indiana, is a model for how to publicly address issues in a way that demonstrates trust and respect. When she speaks publicly about the community’s concerns regarding police, she tries to present a balanced approach—acknowledging and addressing valid concerns while still recognizing that the majority of officers in her city are working hard to do the right thing.

Leaders should understand and respect each other’s roles and responsibilities: Though police, labor, and elected leaders share many common goals, they also have distinct responsibilities, must answer to different constituencies, and have unique experiences and backgrounds.

Rather than viewing these differences as obstacles, leaders should strive to learn from one another and understand each other’s perspectives. This means engaging in honest dialogue, remaining open to new ideas, and acknowledging the challenges each other face.

A recent example in Sacramento illustrates how leaders can overcome differences to forge even stronger relationships. There, the mayor and police union president met privately to discuss comments each had made to the media following the grand jury decision in Ferguson, Missouri. Although the two leaders had a good working relationship, their public comments reflected different reactions to the Ferguson decision. However, rather than letting these differences damage their relationship, they worked with each other and with the police chief to turn this into an opportunity to discuss their views and learn from one another. Their willingness to respectfully meet and be open to new perspectives not only helped to save their relationship, but to strengthen it.

Leaders should work together to promote officer safety and wellness: Leaders should strive to treat officers the way we want officers to treat people in the community. Promoting officer safety, wellness, and job satisfaction is a perfect opportunity for collaboration between labor, management, and elected officials. Leaders can make great strides in this area by working together.

For example, many departments obtain officer input when selecting uniforms and equipment. In places like Houston and Fort Worth, this approach helped the departments gain

union support for “mandatory wear” body armor policies, a critical aspect of officer safety. Responding to officer concerns that wearing body armor was too uncomfortable in these warm climates, labor and management worked together to select a cooler exterior vest option.

Labor and management have also come together to address the significant toll that stress, dangerous working conditions, and traumatic incidents can take on officers. One model for collaboration on officer wellness is the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) program in Philadelphia, which is offered through the local union and fully supported by management. Similarly, in Prince George’s County the police chief and union president released a joint letter to officers regarding alcohol recovery programs available for first responders.

Elected leaders can also promote officer satisfaction by creating conditions that make it easier for officers to do their jobs. Sometimes this means providing funds for things such as equipment and cars, and other times it means listening to officers’ concerns and expressing support for officers as long as they follow protocols and do what is right.

Leaders can also improve officer job satisfaction by working together to negotiate contracts fairly, honestly, and from a “win-win” perspective. For example, in Camden, New Jersey, the police chief and union president recently worked together to successfully negotiate the first contract under the reorganized police department. They were able to avoid arbitration by respecting each other’s points of view and understanding what each side needs and expects.

Even when compensation decisions are not favorable to officers, we have heard that officers are more likely to be satisfied if they feel that leaders solicited their input and were open and candid about financial issues. For example, the mayor in Racine met with officers to discuss the city’s financial situation and explain how funds were being spent. This honest approach helped alleviate many of the officers’ concerns and removed barriers to reaching a contract agreement.

The key lesson that we have learned throughout our work is that we are all better off when labor, management, and local officials work together. We hope that leaders across the country will commit to these five principles for building trust and collaboration: (1) finding common ground; (2) engaging in open communication and soliciting each other’s input; (3) treating each other with respect and professionalism; (4) seeking to understand each other’s roles and responsibilities; and (5) working together to promote officer safety and wellness. By committing to these principles, we can overcome the negativity of the past and move forward—together—towards building better communities and police departments.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views. I would be glad to answer any questions that members of the Task Force may have.

ⁱ Implementing a Body-Worn Camera Program: Recommendations and Lessons Learned;http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Free_Online_Documents/Technology/implementing%20a%20body-worn%20camera%20program.pdf.

ⁱⁱ “Legitimacy and Procedural Justice: A New Element of Police Leadership.” Police Executive Research Forum, 2014.

http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Free_Online_Documents/Leadership/legitimacy%20and%20procedural%20justice%20-%20a%20new%20element%20of%20police%20leadership.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Statement in Support of Mandatory Body Armor and Seatbelt Wear Policies,

http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Web_Uploads/body%20armor%20and%20seatbelts.pdf.

^{iv} A Statement By Police Executives, Police Labor Leaders, and Elected Officials on Principles for Building Trust and Collaboration, February 23, 2015.