



Transcript: Innovations in Policing— Innovation Behind the Teaching Police Department: An Interview With Colonel Dean Esserman

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Justice Podcast Series is designed to provide the latest information in justice innovations, practices, and perspectives from the field of criminal justice. In this edition, James H. Burch II, Acting Director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, talks with Colonel Dean Esserman, Providence Police Department, and Director Barney Melekian, COPS Office, about the concept of the teaching police department.

Jim Burch: Hello friends and colleagues. I'm Jim Burch for the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and welcome to another edition of BJA's Justice Podcast Series. Today, we invite you to join in our conversation with Colonel Dean Esserman of the Providence, Rhode Island, Police Department, and Director Barney Melekian of the COPS Office here at the Department of Justice as we discuss the innovative idea of teaching police departments. During this podcast, we discuss how the concept of teaching police department has so much potential for the law enforcement profession and how we see this concept possibly evolving in the years to come.

Colonel Esserman, Director Melekian, thank you both for joining us today. Colonel, yesterday at a conference here in Rhode Island sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Roger Williams University, and your agency, the Providence Police Department, you shared your vision for something called the teaching police department, which is a theory that applies the teaching hospital model to the law enforcement field. I think it's a fascinating idea and one that I know Director Melekian has voiced his support for as well as others in the field of law enforcement. I'd like to ask you to talk a little bit about that model for our listeners, so that they can hear what it is that we're talking about and respond to that as we consider this new approach to advancing the profession of law enforcement.

Colonel Dean Esserman: All right, thank you. I'm, excited to be here with you today and with colleagues from the Justice Department.

Almost 2 years ago, on April 9, I flew up the President of John Jay College, Jeremy Travis, asked the Dean of the Brown Medical School, the President of Roger Williams University, to join me for a couple of hours to talk about an idea. And the idea was to develop a proposal for a teaching police department, akin to the teaching hospital. That there are thousands of hospitals in America, but there are only a little

over 200 teaching hospitals in America that are affiliated with a little over 200 medical schools in the nation. And that there are thousands of police departments in America, but there is yet to be a teaching police department. I got the idea from an unusual vantage point, one being the son of a medical school professor, my father, who I loved and who loved being part of NYU, a teaching hospital for 50 years of his life. And the second was from being a patient at the Brown hospital for a long time, a couple years ago, and I started to get to know the staff. I'd hang with the janitors, nurses, the doctors, and I discovered that there was a morning meeting where all the doctors came together from the night shift and the day shift and behind that curtain every morning, weekends as well, doctors were presenting the cases on the ward and using a teaching methodology to teach the new doctors so that both better thinking was going on in the case in particular, and the case was being used as a teaching vehicle and research was brought to the forum. And there was a commitment that when you graduated medical school, your education only began, and that if you chose a teaching hospital, you were going to evolve from being a young learning student, to one day being an older teaching doctor. But the commitment was to life-long learning.

So that meeting on April 9, almost 2 years ago, produced a conversation with my dear friend here, Chief Melekian, and caught his interest, thank goodness.

Jim Burch: That's great, and I think just a fascinating idea and its one that the audience yesterday was absolutely thrilled with and that it's been the buzz of this meeting in terms of how can we take this idea and run with it. And I know that this is something that you've been thinking through for quite a while, and it will take us some additional time to really flesh out some of these details. But I think there is a lot of support for this approach and I know Director Melekian earlier, before we began our interview today, you talked about how this has the potential to really revolutionize the field and bring policing to a place that we all know that it can be. Did you want to add anything to the description of the approach here?

Director Barney Melekian: Yes. I think when Chief Esserman brought this up 2 or 3 years ago, I did say that I thought that it would revolutionize—I said then and I believe it now, that it will revolutionize policing. I think that for all the things that policing, and all the ways policing serves the communities of this nation, one of the big drawbacks is that each department does so in relative isolation. Usually,

not always, but usually, sort of confined to the ideas of its own organizational culture. And the idea that—we know that there's value in sharing, we know that there's value in collaborating, but there are a lot of barriers—economic, cultural, traditions, those kind of things—that stand in the way of that. The model of the teaching police department, the model of bringing people together to share best practices at the operational level is incredibly exciting and really has the opportunity, I think, as I said before, to revolutionize policing in a way that has not been done in a very, very long time.

Jim Burch: I've always heard about the approach that LEAA used where they would take up-and-coming police executives or police managers and put them into a private company or corporation—General Electric, for example—and they would spend time in that company, learning about management structures and leadership and those kinds of things. I've heard about how beneficial that was to some police leaders. Chief Phil Keith from Knoxville for many, many years talked about how this was so helpful to him in understanding leadership context. Do you think, Colonel Esserman, this is sort of the next generation of that kind of thinking or is this something different?

Colonel Dean Esserman: I don't know; that's a great question. You know, the, I know that when you talk about a teaching institution, the first reaction people have is, "Oh I'm going to school somewhere." When I think of a teaching police department, I think of two things; I think of a place you come to learn, in a regional approach, but I also think that you are joining an organization that internally embraces the idea of life-long learning. That part of your years here are going to be embracing learning and then teaching. Just as people will come here to visit, you will go places to visit. But if you are joining a teaching police department as part of a medical school, there isn't a day you graduate and play golf on Saturdays. You commit yourself to learning, teaching, and participating in a learning environment your entire career, from a young doctor, to your elder years. And just as you go on loan to different universities for master classes or for fellowships or internships, and just as other visitors come to your institution, the institution itself has committed itself to not just operational work or the delivery of medical service, but to life-long learning and advancing the art and believing that that's part of their core work.

I think we'd be open to any idea, I mean I'm sitting here with the Director of BJA, and the Director of the COPS Office, and outside is the Director of NIJ, that we just have three of the leaders together of our Justice Department talking to a local police chief about an idea, makes me realize how little I know right now of what it would look like over the years ahead. But I would look at it that Providence is part of Rhode Island, it's part of New England, it would be part of a regional approach to developing best practices, but also to developing the people to say that in the 500 members of the Providence Police Department, of the several thousand police officers who serve throughout Rhode Island, of the several 10- to 20-, 30-thousand police officers who serve in the New England region, that there is a responsibility to develop these officers in thought and not just in action.

Director Barney Melekian: I think that the point that the Colonel makes is critical for a couple points because your question I think pointed out one of the challenges the profession faces, which is the kind of learning that we're talking about in this podcast has really traditionally been focused at the executive end of the scale, the chiefs and sheriffs and possibly the seconds in command. And yet, we know that in some ways what I've often called the real work of policing—the determination, the line between rhetoric, the line between vision and hallucination—is defined by the supervisors and the mid-managers, by the line personnel. And one of the things that is exciting to me about this is it is not that unusual for a chief or a sheriff to see their career path as involving life-long learning. But I think it is less the case for line officers and line supervisors. And this opportunity, this model I think is really going to change that. And if we can change the career officer or the career supervisor, if we can change his or her point of view to see this career as life-long learning, I think that's the revolutionary part of changing the profession because I think our focus at training our line personnel is all too often on the tactical and not on the strategic aspects of their job.

Jim Burch: And what I found so appealing about this idea, Colonel, is that it—we are focused on building the capacity at the individual level and building the professionalism and leadership qualities at the individual level. But when you talk about this, what I really hear you saying is that this is about, this is a value proposition for organizations. And that is so different from what we've done in the past. I think a lot of our leadership programs have focused on individuals as, our slice of the organization to bring to a different level. What you're talking about here addresses individual capacities, but it's also talking about changing the culture of an organization to value learning, life-long learning, and that is holistically different, I think, from what we've seen in the past. Would you agree?

Colonel Dean Esserman: Yeah, and that's why I need a lot of help from my colleagues in the Justice Department to think about that, not just to help make it happen, but to actually bring the minds together around the table to think about what that is like. We have a great opportunity because we have a Justice Department that has so recommitted itself to working with the local communities that it allows a police chief to sit with Justice Department officials and just talk about ideas, and that in and of itself is a treat.

Jim Burch: Well, that's what this is all about. And I think that we all share the commitment to talking about these ideas together but also bringing additional partners to the table, and I was so encouraged to hear you talk about Brown being at the table and others being at the table. Are there other partners that we should engage in this discussion or in this dialogue, either at the national level or at the regional level? And I know Director Melekian, you have particular thoughts about regional capacities that we might leverage on this, but Colonel, did you want to start?

Colonel Dean Esserman: No, I'd like to listen.

Jim Burch: Director?

Director Barney Melekian: One of the strengths of the COPS Office, particularly in the '90s I think was the Regional Community Policing Institutes, the so-called RCPIs, which there were about 31 or 32 of them scattered around the country. They were affiliated in varying degrees with different agencies and in some cases with academic institutions. But they were centers of training. I don't know whether they best might accurately be described as centers of learning, but they were certainly centers of training. They have languished, quite frankly, over the last 8 years. They have not been financially supported by the federal government in some time. They have had varying degrees of success in lining up local funding, but it is my intention, it's the intention of the Associate Attorney General to—and hopefully above that—to bring, to back those RCPIs, to revitalize those RCPIs. Whether or not it will be all 31 of them is another matter, but there will certainly be a core group, geographically distributed, that are going to become centers of learning, that are going to become tied to academic institutions in their region. And I think the teaching police department model that is being articulated by Providence and Roger Williams and Brown and John Jay, may well serve as a model for the RCPIs. It's entirely possible, for example, that the teaching police department may well become or be affiliated then with a regional RCPI for New England that would allow Department of Justice resources to be brought to this equation.

Jim Burch: All right, Colonel, did you want to add to that?

Colonel Dean Esserman: Just that, this is a great opportunity, not for the police chief, but for the police officers. And that matters to me.

Jim Burch: Well said. And I think that we look forward—and I think we being the Bureau of Justice Assistance as well as, at least from my conversations this week with the National Institute of Justice and partnering together with the COPS Office and the RCPI networks—to follow your lead and assisting in this discussion and continuing our efforts to refine this model and think about how best to take the model around the country.

Colonel, do you see this approach as one that is more beneficial to the larger, urban departments, or do you see this as something that sort of fits universally, regardless of agency size or strength?

Colonel Dean Esserman: I'm very hopeful that size won't matter. I've experienced both the big size coming from New York City, and smaller sizes, and what I've discovered is, unlike New York City, most police officers across the country are already trained in regional police academies. They begin in a collaborative, regional approach before they join their individual police departments. And later in their career, if they advance into a specialty, or up in the rank, they will often go away to regional schools. So I don't think this favors the size of a department. I think it's very applicable to all.

Jim Burch: Director, do you have a comment on that? From your perspective in Pasadena, sort of the West Coast experience, do you see this as applicable across the nation?

Director Barney Melekian: I absolutely do, and I will—what, one of the things I think is going to happen—and this is nothing more than an opinion based on 37 years of experience, and I have no scientific research to back this up—but I do believe that the economic crisis that we have gone through and are coming out of slowly is going to change policing in a fundamental way, in a way that I'm not sure that any of us can clearly see yet. And I think this idea of regionalization, of collaboration, is going to become more and more the norm. You're starting to see it happen in places that you would never have thought 3 or 4 years ago that it was going to occur. I've seen cities just in Los Angeles County start to merge functions in a way that was just unheard of. I think the teaching police department model, properly implemented, has the opportunity to sort of allow that evolution to take place with a minimal amount of disruption and to allow a truly, sort of evolutionary process to occur.

Jim Burch: And I think, you know, from our conversations again earlier today, I think I'm looking at this in a way that potentially this idea can be taken from the law enforcement context and used in other parts of our justice system as well to advance those professions equally, the corrections environment, the court environment, for example, those places may also find this idea of benefit, and it may be something that we can work together to expand. So we are very, very encouraged.

So Colonel Dean Esserman, the Chief of Providence Police Department, Director Barney Melekian of the COPS Office and formerly of Pasadena, California, Police Department, thank you both very much for this conversation, I know our listeners look forward to hearing more about this idea as it develops and as we begin to define it even further and then move forward in applying it to the field. Thank you.

Director Barney Melekian: Thank you, Jim.

Colonel Dean Esserman: Thank you.

Jim Burch: Thank you for taking the time to join us for this conversation. If you found the discussion interesting, we encourage you to visit the BJA web site for more innovative ideas and best practices at www.ojp.gov/BJA. From all of us here at BJA, thank you for tuning in to today's podcast. We hope you will join us again for another edition of BJA's Justice Podcast Series.

CONTACT US

Bureau of Justice Assistance
Office of Justice Programs
810 Seventh Street NW
Washington, DC 20531
Phone: 202-616-6500
Toll-free: 1-866-859-2687
E-mail: AskBJA@usdoj.gov
Web site: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA