

CONNECTIONS

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**Getting to We: Bridging the Gap
between Communities and Local
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THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:
Fractured or United?

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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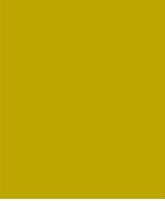
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Getting to We: Bridging the Gap between Communities and Local Law Enforcement Agencies in Virginia

By Brian N. Williams

The current state of police-community relations in the United States is in a precarious position. Cell phones, viral videos, and social media platforms have allowed us to witness—or become aware of—police officers assaulting law-abiding people, or killing unarmed citizens such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor due to the actions and inactions of police officers. These senseless attacks have

run parallel with nonsensical verbal and physical assaults on police professionals, both prior and subsequent to the infamous attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, coupled with American citizens' killing of officers such as Pentagon police officer George Gonzalez and Capitol police officer William Evans. These developments have divided communities, impacted police morale, and affected public trust and confidence in both law enforcement and the criminal justice system. These examples of local realities have shaped public perceptions that have regional, national, and even global ramifications. The costs and consequences of these actions and inactions have policy, practical, and political implications.

Many Americans now question police performance, the motives of police officers, and even the need for police departments. Similarly, police officers are wondering if the public can look at them for who they are: human beings who seek to serve others at the expense of themselves, their families, and loved ones. These issues jeopardize police department efforts to enlist residents as partners in the cocreation of policies and practices that lead to complementary action on public safety, public order, and community well-being. As a result, we are experiencing a clear

and present danger to American democracy: a disconnect between citizens and their institutions.

AT THE INTERSECTION OF PAST AND PRESENT

Like a vehicle in need of a major tune-up, American democracy is stalling at the intersection of past and present. The apparitions and historic harms of the past—such as racist and discriminatory policies and practices grounded in the notions of supremacy—continue in the present. Consequently, recent Gallup polling data highlight that public trust in vital governmental institutions within the United States is down. In particular, the criminal

justice system continues to see the waning effects of public confidence.

The problem at the center of this nightmarish scenario—lack of civic engagement—is invisible, yet visible in plain sight. We can feel its presence and are experiencing its power. It has polarized the populace, hushed public debate, and has frustrated our efforts to “form a more perfect Union.”

The lack of meaningful and purposeful engagement is coming at an inopportune time. We are experiencing a pandemic within a pandemic—where the COVID-19 pandemic is raging alongside the ongoing pandemic of systemic and institutionalized racism within the criminal justice system, in general, and within the profession of policing in particular. At this time of despair and despondency, where do we go from here?

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD

Glancing at rearview mirrors is beneficial. These mirrors provide a much-needed perspective that keep occupants in a car safe as they travel to their desired destination. As American society and its supporting democracy idle at this current intersection of past and present, we have an opportunity to look back before proceeding ahead.



Across the Commonwealth of Virginia—like so many jurisdictions within the United States—communities are facing problems from the past that are coupled with and compounded by those of the present.



Reimagining Policing workshop, August 2021

The preamble of the US Constitution is a document that frames the American democracy: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity . . .” As we seek a path forward, it is becoming clearer that a pathway is hidden in plain sight—the need to get to *we*.

GETTING TO WE: A CASE STUDY IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Across the Commonwealth of Virginia—like so many jurisdictions within the United States—commu-

nities are facing problems from the past that are coupled with and compounded by those of the present, which challenge contemporary and future efforts to form a more perfect union and get to *we*. This lack of unity within and across communities negatively impacts relational policing.

In Virginia, many have acknowledged the obstacles of the past and their impact on the present. More important, we are engaging in actions and activities to take advantage of the opportunities that are before us. One example is the effort led by the Department of Criminal Justice Services, with the assistance of the Public Engagement in Governance



Reimagining Policing workshop, August 2021

Looking, Listening and Learning Laboratory (PEGLLLLab) within the University of Virginia Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. These two entities have developed, implemented, and facilitated a series of “courageous conversations” across five sites in the state: Danville, Newport News, Norfolk, Prince William County, and Richmond.

Our courageous conversations took an asset-based approach to community development and were designed to be intentionally inclusive, trauma informed, and equitable to embrace a *power-with* as opposed to a *power-over* philosophy. As such, these dialogues, which speak across differences, consist of a wide variety

of people from numerous backgrounds—advocates and activists for police reform, educators, youth development professionals, clergy members, police officers and executives, and lay citizens—who bring lived personal and professional experiences and resulting perspectives. Challenged to go beyond the notion of a safe space—an environment that limits the expression of real feelings to prevent offending others—we have utilized the concept of a brave space where participants bring their authentic selves to the table to share their truths within a setting where judgment is suspended, and grace is extended.

Our gatherings are based upon the premise that where you sit depends upon where you stand. In other words, your perspective of the truth is your truth, but it is limited to your lived experiences. To onboard and usher participants into a brave space, we utilize an item that we all have an understanding of but often fail to have a deeper appreciation for. An example is a fully loaded pizza with all the meat, vegetables, and cheese toppings. Participants all see the same thing—a pizza—but those who don’t eat pork, are lactose intolerant, or are vegetarian or vegan see something that omnivores don’t see. This icebreaker sets the tone and centers our discussion. It allows for those

who haven't had negative interactions and encounters with the police to get a better sense of the lived experiences and perceptions of those who have had negative interactions. They may live in the same jurisdiction and see the same badge and uniform, but have different experiences, perceptions, and realities that frame their respective truths. This approach has been effective in heading off and mitigating strong opinions that have arisen during our courageous conversations. It also reinforces the reality of what is often hidden in plain sight to some and surfaces the reason for—and the goals behind—our gatherings.

Our goals for this work are simple: to improve communication, to enhance understanding, and to facilitate more constructive, productive, and collaborative partnerships that cocreate policies and practices that coproduce public safety, public order, and community well-being. To date we have faced some challenges but have remained vigilant in starting where *we* are, using what we have, and doing the best that we can. Each site has remained true to the pursuit of going from words to action: As they come to see something that impacts relational policing and relational intelligence, they say something, but what is of paramount importance, they do something.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: VOICES FROM THE PAST AND PATHWAYS TOWARD THE FUTURE

Albert Einstein noted that “we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” Our approach to courageous conversations reflects his sentiments. To go from surface change to fundamental and substantive change within our systems, structures, and institutions require a new approach to imagine, conceive, coconstruct, and coproduce public safety, public order, and community well-being. Our efforts are committed to that process.

We are at an inflection point. Participants across our sites have accepted the individual challenge and charge of acknowledging the pain of others, feeling their pain, and acting upon the pain that they now share with an understanding that corrective action is collective action. They are embracing the opportunity to serve as a thermostat (instruments that change and maintain the temperature of their environment) rather than a thermometer (an instrument limited to registering the temperature of their environment).

An example of a culminating event to help community understanding and to encourage police participants to see the impetus for change was an open mic, spoken word/poetry slam

that was codesigned and coproduced by residents and police officers in Newport News. A group of secondary school students shared the stage with officers from the Newport News Police Department to share their truths on the current state of relational policing. Participants aired their frustrations of past incidents and their impact on present-day perceptions and relationships, yet embedded within their presentations was a brighter future state with implications for public policy, professional practices, and community engagement. Speakers leveraged their respective truths to communicate to others not just the obstacles, but more importantly, the opportunities to improve relations between the police and the community on the other side of now.

Listening to these courageous conversations over the past year, it became clear that communities and law enforcement partners share common goals and visions for the future. For example, everyone worries about whether they will come home unharmed at the end of a shift or at the end of the day; everyone strives to be understood and to really be seen for who they are; everyone cares very deeply about their communities; and everyone wants healthy, vibrant, and transparent relationships between law enforcement and com-

munity members. And therein lies the ultimate challenge—how do we get to that place that we all seem to want?

The Department of Criminal Justice Services and the PEGLLL-Lab believe that one way to get there requires us to comfort the afflicted, which in some ways, requires afflicting the comfortable. We are embracing the opportunity to dig deep, immersing ourselves in the viewpoints and experiences of others, validating those perspectives, and looking at ourselves through the lenses of others. By doing this, we can dismantle the disconnect between citizens and their governing institutions and bridge the gap between communities and their local law enforcement agencies. We encourage others to join us in seeing and leaning into the problems of today as platforms to enhance relational policing of tomorrow. We believe in the words that some have attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” ■

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This article reflects the views of the author, not the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services.



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