



Protecting the Public *and* Officers: De-escalation Is Just **One** Component

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Many of you have sat down with your police chief, colonel, sheriff, or perhaps your entire law enforcement agency at least once in the past year to discuss the topics of community-police

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relations, de-escalation, and procedural justice. And how could you not, when you have probably noticed that almost every time you pick up the paper, watch the news, or listen to the radio, you hear about an incident in which law enforcement's actions are in question?

In my role as a police chief and as president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, I have been involved in many conversations with local jurisdictions, states and federal officials regarding policing today and the challenges faced by law enforcement.

One thing I like to point out is that there are roughly 18,000 police agencies in the United States, and they are staffed by approximately 800,000 hardworking police officers who have millions of positive encounters with the public on a daily basis. Those incidents you read about or see on the news are not the norm. That doesn't mean, however, that we should not constantly be looking for ways to build greater trust in our communities, improve the profession as whole, and enhance the safety of our communities.

What is De-escalation?

In 2014, President Barack Obama signed an Executive Order establishing the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The members of the task force, which included law enforcement officers, social activists and academics, worked over a six-month period to gather input from stakeholders and the public about the most pressing issues and the best practices already in place in communities across the country. The goal of the task force was to develop recommendations for local, state, tribal and federal agencies about how policing practices need to evolve to accommodate the new landscape. To accomplish this goal, they focused on six core areas: building trust and legitimacy; policy and oversight; technology and social media; community policing and crime reduction; training and education; and officer wellness and safety.

In May 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice released the final report from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The report highlights the importance of de-escalation and recommends that departments have comprehensive policies in a number of areas that emphasize de-escalation, as well as training that incorporates de-escalation techniques. De-escalation should be included in standard policies and training for use of force, policing mass demonstrations, and responding to individuals with mental health concerns.

In the context of law enforcement, de-escalation refers to the strategic slowing down of an incident in order to allow officers more time, distance, space and tactical flexibility during

incident response. Although policing agencies have been teaching de-escalation techniques for years, it has become a recent topic of focus. As a result, agencies are evaluating their training and policies on the subject in response to the task force report.

Here in Massachusetts, the two largest chiefs associations, the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police and the Massachusetts Major City Chiefs of Police, collaborated to develop a twenty-eight-page report as a guide for chiefs. The following is an excerpt from "A Response to the Final

Protecting Officers as Well

As with many critical issues, organizations have begun issuing guidance to assist agencies. At times, however, this guidance is conflicting. I am certainly an advocate for using distance, time and communication to slow down a dynamic situation. We need to keep in mind, however, that the policies, practices and rules that we advocate will affect agencies of various sizes and resources and officers with a wide range of fitness and skill levels. That is why the U.S. Supreme Court and the other courts across the

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Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing," which was released last September:

"Massachusetts already follows many of the recommendations outlined in the 21st Century Policing Task Force Report. Specifically, law enforcement training in the use of force is in compliance with United States Supreme Court decisions and emphasizes that officers may use only the degree of reasonable force necessary to make an arrest or protect the public. Further, use-of-force training in the Commonwealth utilizes a response model that incorporates the principle of de-escalation, without referring to it as such. This means officers are expected to adjust their response to a person's actions as the person escalates or de-escalates the situation. Additional training regarding techniques for better utilization of distance, time, and communication, and further policy guidance in the area of making arrest-summons decisions, would be useful and is scheduled for the coming training year."

United States issue guidelines and rules that encompass the totality of the circumstances instead of handing down absolutes.

On a daily basis, law enforcement officers encounter a variety of situations, ranging from traffic stops to shots fired. Officers are frequently responding to individuals who have mental illnesses, are under the influence of drugs and alcohol, or have anger management issues. Often, they are not only operating as law enforcement officers, but also assuming the responsibility of social workers and other community support roles. The reality is that officers are now expected to enter volatile situations, successfully negotiate a peaceful outcome, and then move on to the next call.

As stewards of our respective policing agencies, chiefs of police have a responsibility to think seriously about the traumatic impact it has on an officer when he or she is compelled to use force, particularly deadly force. Having taken an oath to preserve all life means that, as administrators, we have a special obliga-

tion to preserve and protect the sanctity of our officers' lives and overall physical and emotional well-being.

Given that policing is very complex, and the level of situations encountered by law enforcement are largely aligned with failures or cracks in our social systems, police training always has been and always will be dynamic and evolving and based on the solutions available, whether they are related to tactical, behavioral or technological advances. That includes

officers are communicating with him or her and trying to defuse the situation, distance and time become an issue and the threat level of that situation is elevated for both the public and the responding officers. Depending on the immediate threat and the cooperation level of the suspect during his or her encounter with law enforcement, there may not be time to safely de-escalate a situation without using some degree of force.

a positive policing culture. It will mean thinking about how we take care of our first responders so that they have a greater appreciation of the demands that are placed on them, and how they care for themselves so that they have greater situational awareness, emotional maturity, and resilience following a traumatic event. Then, and only then, can we begin to weave procedural justice into how we train our officers to respond to the complex dynamics of policing.



training our law enforcement officers to respond appropriately to a variety of different situations, especially those in which the just and lawful application of force is necessary.

While de-escalation remains the goal of every law enforcement officer when dealing with confrontations and violent encounters, it is not always possible in every situation, particularly given the split-second decisions required by many of these encounters. When officers are trying to de-escalate a situation (using such options as talking, teamwork, time, etc.), there typically must be some cooperation on the part of the suspect or subject. If a suspect is holding a knife, and he or she allows the responding officers to contain the situation (i.e. stands still or drops the knife), officers can de-escalate the situation. But if the suspect does not cooperate when the

regarding de-escalation and the use of force, it is imperative that any reforms be carefully researched and evidence-based. By proceeding in a careful and thoughtful manner, we ensure that both community and officer safety will be enhanced.

Training alone is not the answer to better policing, enhanced community-police relations, and public trust. The broader failures of society cannot and should not be left at the feet of law enforcement alone to fix. A united effort by law enforcement, our communities, faith-based groups, politicians, academics, and others will need to occur in order to develop creative solutions to help identify and respond to the problems we are all facing.

Part of that solution may require a significant shift and redefinition of policing in today's complicated society. This will require both the profession and our communities to renew their embrace of

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United Effort Needed

As we move forward in examining law enforcement policies and training procedures

Professional, academic and community organizations have been making substantial progress in these areas. The International Association of Chiefs of Police continues to be a leader in the field, working tirelessly to promote best practices, model policies and training through research, programs, advocacy and outreach. To that end, the IACP held a summit in April to examine these important issues. The purpose of the summit was to gather a wide range of law enforcement officers to examine recent proposals for new tactics and approaches and how they would affect a variety of different agencies as well as officer safety.

The issues facing law enforcement and communities today are complex, and de-escalation is just one of them. As we all know, communication is key. Local officials are encouraged to be in constant contact with the leaders of their law enforcement agencies to learn more about the challenges they are facing and to help enhance their connections with their communities. 🌟