

THE OPINION SHOP

Raleigh police chief: Building relationships critical before any crises

BURGETTA EPLIN WHEELER



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Raleigh Police Chief Cassandra Deck-Brown met with the editorial board this week after two years in the position and talked about her experiences, her philosophies and my notes from the meeting.

Q: How's the job going? Have you settled in?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: Time does fly. Every position within the organization, having gone through all of those ranks does give you a different perspective. There are aspects I knew would exist, but it's a learning opportunity every day for the chief. The experience as chief and the experience of being able to reach out and have conversations with other chiefs across the nation because of our size has been a huge opportunity as well. I don't know whether you ever truly settle into the position, but I am enjoying it.

Headquarters for the police department is on Six Forks Road, north of Spring Forest. We moved in as temporary site but set it up as headquarters, and we remain there now. We have six different district stations. The northern district is housed in that building. We've transitioned from one side of the city to the other and moved on with business as usual.

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We moved and continue to do what we need to do. The sheriff and I meet on a regular basis. It doesn't matter where we're located.

We are just having our grand opening of the northeast district station. It's been on Litchford Road for many years. One of the things we did when we last restructured the department and redesigned several of the beats ended up because of resource concerns in the middle of the economic recession, we basically redrew district lines but had to keep



The Litchfield station, the northeast district was situated in the north district geographically, but now it's moving to Green Dairy Road behind the Michael's on Capital.

With every challenge, there comes an opportunity I believe. Like most departments, particularly during the recession period, resources were limited. But what that forces you to do is to think about how you can police in a smarter way. As a city, growth has always been a bit of a challenge and an opportunity in general. Even during the recession, the city continued to grow. It forced us to look at how to continue to provide the same level of service to citizens as well as look at how we can police smarter. We relied on technology in some ways and additional personnel in some ways. They were not allocated at the time but placed more strategically so we could respond to those needs. How do you deploy those resources when you're looking at the continued growth? Downtown grows up as opposed to out. Budget planning plays a huge part. We're in the middle of planning for the coming year. Where we place officers, how we place them, we have to plan accordingly and project. One of the things I have instituted as police chief is intelligence-led policing. We primarily focus on the crime data and the trends. If you're looking at a predictive policing model, and crime and trends look a certain way, what's the likelihood of that crime happening again? One of the things I've conveyed to our staff, and you really do see the buy-in, how do we plan accordingly in that regard as it relies to resources? Using that same data as we plan for this budget in addition to facilities or whatever's growing in our city, how do we apply that growth model to a need within our own organization? How do we look at technology? We're the second largest department in the state, 42nd largest in the nation. You do have to plan accordingly with refurbishing equipment and personnel and everything else that allows us to do our jobs. If I know I have laptops to replace or radios to replace, we have to look at it with a forecasting model so you make sure you have adequate time and money to replace those things.



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Q: What sorts of technology is the department using?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: Bad guys are relying on technology. In order to stay ahead of that game, we have to be prudent in what we do and use it wisely so it doesn't impinge on rights.

We have a device we don't get to use without a necessary court order in place. It doesn't give the opportunity to listen in to phone calls or hack into accounts. So much is censored on the court side, even in applying for an order to retrieve information. Equipment is not just used for the sake of taking it off the shelf to use it. It saves lives. The automated license plate readers, they've saved lives as well. We may be able to capture license plates associated with a known criminal in another capacity. We're able to arrest those folks and bring them to justice.

Q: What sorts of conversations have you had in the wake of the shootings of three Muslim students in Chapel Hill?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: We have a strong working relationship with our Muslim community. One of the things that I have really enjoyed as chief is getting to know the community and getting to know all of those within the community, building those partnerships, meeting the imams and communicating with them and having dinner during Ramadan. We have visited the mosques and sat in on their evening prayer service just to be a part of the greater community, and that has made all the difference in the world. During the funeral, our officers were very much involved in assisting their security over there, to get them what they needed from a security standpoint as well as a traffic standpoint.

We have had the opportunity, it's been a huge plus, just to sit and talk about how to continue to build relationships in the community. Along those lines, the Sikh community is another community who is very often misunderstood. They don't have a temple in Wake County, but

My daughter, Laura Riddick, is in prison. There's nothing 'light' about her punishment.

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They have one in Durham. I've visited their temple on Sunday and had a community feast with them and participated in their entire service. That builds the relationship you need when the crisis occurs. It's not in the crisis when you build a relationship, you build it beforehand. Having that dialogue, having an understanding of what facets of our community there are and talk about how they experience the lack of tolerance.

Q: What's your biggest need?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: We are such a fortunate department in terms of resources. Do I anticipate additional personnel with the continued growth in our city? We're on every accolade list that exists.

We train a lot in our department. Training is crucial and critical given what we see around our community and our city and our nation in regards to police and community relationships. We have that dialogue, have training to know when to escalate when you need to but also to de-escalate in crisis situation is important.

Q: What conversations did you have with officers post-Ferguson?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: Training is critical. The training that we provide our officers covers not just going out to the range and shooting to qualify, but we have scenario-based training, but we've been doing them for almost two decades. Now we have given that a boost, reality-based training. You put officers in a situation, a controlled environment, where they have to make critical decisions, critical judgments, and have to be able to articulate why they did or did not do what action was required. That's where they get to not necessarily for first time get it right, but they get a do-over, have an opportunity again to explain their actions.

Raleigh's done well at this. We have worked very hard to solidify relationships in our city. You can't do it in the crisis. You have to do it before then. As the capital city, this is where protests happen. This is where marches are going to happen. This is where people are going to have a voice. This is the seat of government for our state. We have to look at what that looks like at the end of the day in terms of freedom of speech. It gives me the opportunity to reach out to other agencies and to benchmark what other departments are doing. It gives us the opportunity also to take a look at when things happen locally or nationwide and ask, could we have done something different or better? That's a constant strive for our department, to look at putting forth best practices. You have to learn from others. Training goes a long way. Not that we're perfect at it. We have so many marches and protests in our city, we have to work with all agencies that have a hand in that. Whether it's a protest at a college or something at the capitol building, we're working with other agencies. We have to recognize and remember that individuals have a right to free speech. They don't have a right to burn the city down. They have a right to voice concerns. They have a right to be heard.

Q: What's the Raleigh police role in the Moral Monday situation?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: Those events came with much planning between agencies and communication with the leaders of the Moral Monday movement. We were there to assist. That's important as well. The Raleigh Police Department police the legislative police department in that regard. They are the ones who have actually affected the arrest. And we're the ones who are transporting.

Q: What metrics do you look at each day?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: I look at the crime report from the night before. That's how I start my day. That's my coffee in the morning. I

look to see what has occurred the night before. I follow up with commanders I need to. That's usually one of the first things I do. The second is before I go to bed, I look at my calendar for the next day.

Q: The crime rate is down considerably. What do you attribute that to?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: Smarter policing. Being very proactive. Being very preventive in nature as opposed to being reactive. Intelligence-led policing. There was a time in the course of my career when you came to a community meeting and all we did was tell you how many breakins had happened, just kind of rolling out the data. Now on the policing side of that, maybe what you hear is also what are we doing? What is the MO? Hows does that MO compare to other breakins? Are there any criminals who have that MO? Are we looking at those folks? That's the preventive, the pro-active model of policing.

Q: What have you put in place to handle the number of mentally ill people officers encounter?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: Our officers are CIT trained. We probably have more than anybody else in the county. It gives that first responder the opportunity to engage the consumer is what you call the mentally ill person, give that officer the training to look for certain cues and recognize what they're dealing with and look for other alternatives other than jail. I know that jail is not the place a person in need of mental health treatment needs to go. Those officers are certified. That's national training. It gives officers insight into how to deal with the mentally ill and seek resources. Not every encounter is necessarily an involuntary mental commitment. There are times officers are looking at resources in the community. If the consumer hasn't done anything that warrants a need to be taken into custody, we look at alternatives out there to get them to a better state of being.

Those resources are limited for all of us. What you take away from
what I'm saying is very often we think of the involuntary mental commitment, but there are folks who just simply need help who are walking the streets every day. Their situations haven't risen to the point where we need to take them into custody. We have officers who are out there who amaze me in terms of innovation in terms of reaching out. The standard resources, the Department of Health, those are constantly tapped. I've got officers very much involved in faith-based communities and faith-based entities within our city and they are providing help and assistance to those folks.

Q: The number of officers per capita has gone down. Do you need more officers?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: It's important that you know there is no standard, no national standard in terms of officer per capita. What we'd like it to be is closer to the 2-point number. That decrease is most likely attributed to that period of time because of the recession. Agencies throughout the country were laying people off. If you benchmark agencies across the nation, you see much of those forces simply reduced, with officers laid off, furloughed. We were fortunate not to lay anybody off. We were able to hire and refill vacancies as they occurred. We're at the point of beginning to have that conversation.

Q: Closing thoughts?

Cassandra Deck-Brown: Remember that officers are human. There's no special piece of ground where officers are cultivated. We come from all walks of life. We come with same aspects of humanity that everyone else in society comes with. We go thru a training process that's six months long. That's the onset of socializing people to become a police officer. Whatever the course of what that career looks like, training is paramount, and partnerships are paramount, and building those bridges

is what gets us through the day. The police department, we can talk about the numbers, we can talk about personnel, so the point is we can't do it without the greater community. We can't do it without society helping. and that's everything to reporting crime when they see it to being proactive in helping us protect this city and protect themselves. We don't always get it right but we do try.

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