

Posted 7/15/11

“TEACHING” POLICE DEPARTMENTS? THAT’S RIGHT, *TEACHING*

Medical education is advanced as an appropriate model for the police



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. The 2011 NIJ Conference was full of surprises, most good, a few not so much. But of the sessions attended by your blogger, none proved a bigger head-scratcher than “Teaching Rounds in Police Departments,” which promoted the notion that adopting the model of a teaching hospital would lead to great improvements in the practice of policing.

In the first two years medical school is like school anywhere, mostly lectures. Hands-on training takes place during the third and fourth years, when students rotate through departments at a teaching hospital. It’s by observing experienced physicians, participating in examinations and, later, discussing the cases that budding doctors learn their craft.

This model is the basis for the [Teaching Police Department Initiative](#), or TPDI. It’s planned that the Providence Police Department will become a “teaching police department,” akin to a teaching hospital, where managers from PPD and exchange students from other agencies will collaboratively develop “innovative police department organizational designs, operating policies/procedures, and performance measurement tools.” Roger Williams University’s [Justice System Training and Research Institute](#) will direct the program and provide academic support with assistance from two partners, the Brown University Medical School and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

How Providence PD and Roger Williams came to be chosen we’ll come to later. But it’s clear that this is an exceptionally ambitious program. [COPS Director Bernard Melekian](#), whose office will oversee the study, feels that the medical model is an excellent fit for getting police not just in Rhode Island but around the country to adopt “values-driven” and “evidence-based” cultures. As a former police chief, he is convinced

POLICEISSUES.ORG

that case studies and a “problem-based” learning approach will create “communities of practice” in which collaboration and experimentation are the norm.

Not everyone at the session seemed equally convinced. Technological and medical advances have come a long way in helping physicians diagnose ailments and prescribe and evaluate treatments. Police, on the other hand, still wallow in the subjective. Fixed rules and approaches often prove useless or counterproductive. Time and information, the two critical prerequisites for making good decisions, are in pitifully short supply. Hostile “clients,” uncertain settings and the absence of peer support may be strangers to a teaching hospital, but they’re a routine component of everyday policing.

Academies do what they can to prepare cops for the real world. One of the most ambitious and long-standing approaches is that of the [Federal Law Enforcement Training Center](#), which uses elaborate scenarios and paid role players to simulate field conditions. But even the best exercises can’t start to approach the realism of a teaching hospital, where students administer to real patients under the watchful eyes of medical faculty. Police academies try to bridge the gap between theory and practice by sending students on ride-alongs. It’s only superficially like doing “rounds,” but it’s as close to it as pre-service officers are likely to get.

Police management training much more closely resembles the approach that TPDI favors. Courses for law enforcement managers and executives are offered by state and regional police academies, the [FBI](#), universities including [Northwestern](#) and [Michigan State](#), the IACP’s [Center for Police Leadership and Training](#), and PERF’s [Senior Management Institute for Police](#). Case studies and collaboration have been core aspects of such programs for decades. There are also plentiful police groups at the local level. One example from Los Angeles, the South Bay Police Chiefs Association, hosts regular get-togethers where police managers explore issues of mutual concern. A countywide [Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee](#), with representatives from local, state and Federal agencies serves essentially the same purpose.

Police training and interagency collaboration have reached a high level of maturity. As the NIJ sessions made perfectly clear, deep thinking and experimentation are very much alive and well in policing. Indeed, now that proposed cutbacks in Medicare and Medicaid [threaten the viability of teaching hospitals](#), one could return the favor and offer the cops as a model for, say, medicine.

Excepting, of course, that the environments of policing and doctoring *are* different. While the ultimate law enforcement metric, the incidence of crime, resembles a medical outcome, there is no unique, agreed-upon path to curing social ills. American policing is by purpose and design an intensely local enterprise that’s carried out by upwards of

POLICEISSUES.ORG

twenty-thousand agencies. As James Q. Wilson pointed out in his seminal volume, [Varieties of Police Behavior](#), agencies might share similar goals, but it's communities that determine how officers go about doing their job. Norms differ, and what's acceptable in one place may be deemed excessively intrusive in another.

It's on such shoals that TPDI ultimately runs aground. To designate a police department as a "teaching" site elevates it above its peers and gives it great leverage to set the agenda. That can present a problem for other agencies, if for no other reason than the values, concerns and political climate of their communities may differ. Police chiefs ignore who they work for to their peril.

That lesson was recently driven home in, of all places, Providence. On June 22nd., only two days after the NIJ "teaching rounds" session, Providence police chief Dean Esserman [abruptly announced his resignation](#). He was leaving, he said, due to fallout from allegations that minors drank alcohol at his daughter's graduation party. To some his explanation rang hollow. Last fall three mayoral candidates announced that if elected they would fire him. He managed to hang on, but without a contract. Miffed by his brusque style (he recently got a day off without pay for berating a sergeant) and a generous compensation package (it was reportedly worth \$331,154) officers returned a vote of no confidence. Esserman's unenviable situation was summed up in [a pithy headline](#) a few days after his departure: "Outside the Providence Police, Dean Esserman was the idea man. Inside, he found little acceptance."

Esserman *was* full of ideas. No less authoritative a source than [Roger Williams University](#) described TPDI as his "brainchild." Interestingly, TPDI wasn't funded in the usual manner but through [a \\$750,000 earmark](#) (some might call it *pork*) courtesy U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D – RI). Apparently the university will actually get \$474,000, so it's assumed that DOJ, which is responsible for writing the checks, will retain a chunk and share the rest with its partners.

Your blogger, a retired Fed, is loath to criticize anyone for accepting Federal bucks. After all, it was only yesterday that taxpayers bought him a frozen yogurt (orange 50/50, his favorite.) But a jinx seems to have accompanied Roger Williams' loot. In May it was announced that a budgetary shortfall could force America's first "teaching police department" to [lay off as many as 80 officers](#), or 17 percent of the force. So far, though, the only hammer that's fallen is on the chief.

Well, the Colonel may be gone, but his three-quarter million dollar kid is still around. Joan Sweeney, TPDI's co-director, emphasized that for the program to work Providence cops must be full partners. Sounds good, but considering just how irritated they must

POLICEISSUES.ORG

be with their ex-chief and all his notions, we're not sure we'd like to be in that patrol car when it leaves the station.