Dean Esserman:

Community Policing in Providence: Combating Crime and Fear

When Dean Esserman was hired as Chief of the Providence, Rhode Island, Police Department in 2003, he faced a daunting challenge. The city was trying to spark an urban renaissance, but crime rates were high, people were afraid to come downtown, and the police department was troubled by corruption and distrusted by the community. In the last two years, Esserman has managed to revamp the city's crime-fighting force, replacing the department's traditional methods with a new community policing concept. Now, crime is falling in Providence, and the police are becoming better integrated into the community. *Communities & Banking* talked with Chief Esserman about his community policing philosophy and its effects in Providence.

C&B: Chief Esserman, you have said that strong connections between police officers and the communities they serve are an essential part of any healthy, safe community. What first shaped this conviction?

Esserman: When I was in high school and again in college, I worked as an intern with the New York City police department. I would have never expected that in my first month, I would be delivering a baby in a tenement with a police officer. Through this experience and others, I came to understand that the police deliver more babies than they shoot bad guys. They are engaged in people's lives in intimate and personal ways. Communities, especially lower-income communities, are dependent on the police for much more than crime fighting.

C&B: Such as?

Esserman: We help people deal with their landlords. We get them heat when they need it. We find children when they are lost. We deliver babies. In many ways, the police are the agency of first and last resort for people, especially for people in poverty.

C&B: Following those internships, you took a fairly irregular career path for a police chief. After college, you went to law school, and spent many years working in the district attorney's office in New York City. Why did you ultimately decide to become a police officer?

Esserman: I had some wonderful mentors who challenged me to think more broadly about the police profession and to see how it could make a difference in society. I came to truly believe that the police could be a force for social justice. So, when an opportunity materialized to take a job as police chief in New Haven, Connecticut, I took it. I was the highest ranking rookie to ever enter the police academy. Let me tell you, the academy was definitely harder than law school—at least the push-ups were.

C&B: You mentioned your mentors. How did they influence your current ideas about the role of police in the community?

Esserman: My mentors expanded my understanding of what a police officer does. Part of our job is the protection and preservation of life. We arrest criminals to keep communities safe. But, to see the police simply as enforcers of the law is to miss the point of what we spend most of our time doing. More than any other agency of government, the police are part of a community's fabric. We don't work apart in offices; we work around the clock in neighborhoods. We work on rainy Sundays. We work on loud Fridays nights. We're there. And so, we play a role in community organizing, in capacity building, and in neighborhood development. We are there to do what the community needs us to do.

C&B: What do you think the community needs from the police?

Esserman: I think there are a few things. Obviously, the community wants us to address crime, but I also think they want us to address fear. People don't want to live in fear.

C&B: Are these needs being met?

Esserman: When it comes to crime—yes. Over the last decade, nationwide, police have become remarkably effective at addressing crime, and crime rates have fallen dramatically. When it comes to fear—no. We have not yet wholly embraced this idea.

C&B: The police have been effective in fighting crime, but not in fighting fear. That seems dichotomous. Can you explain?

Esserman: Crime is not the only thing that provokes fear. In March 1982, *The Atlantic Monthly* featured a story by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling called "Broken Windows." The article's main idea was that you do not need to be directly assaulted to feel afraid and victimized. The environment around you can be fearful. If you are walking in a neighborhood where the buildings are vacant, cars are abandoned on the street, there are broken windows in the buildings and graffiti and garbage on the sidewalk, chances are, you will feel assaulted.

Take the New York City subway system, for example. There use to be enormous fear about the subway, but it turned out that there was very little crime. Rather, it was the environment that was fearful. If we can address the environment, we can address fear.

C&B: How can the police change the environment?

Esserman: Through collaboration and partnership. Police departments do not work alone anymore. Rather, the value is on partnership, not just in terms of working with other police agencies, but with all parties that have a vested interest in the same results: reducing crime and fear and improving our community. In Providence, for example, we are partnering with a whole range of groups: social service delivery agencies, schools and educators, community development corporations, merchants, and residents.

C&B: How do these partnerships work?

Esserman: The Rhode Island Community Safety Initiative, sponsored by LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation), is a great example. This program invites local police supervisors and officers to sit at the table with community development corporations. Together, we try to figure out what problems need to be addressed in the community, and how we can address them. The police no longer have to decipher problems on our own. Now we hear about issues directly from the community.

C&B: What are the some of the issues you are finding?

Esserman: Sometimes it's about crime. But, other times we hear, "You know what, if the city built a park, the kids would come." Or, "You know what, I feel assaulted by the environment in my community." Once we know what the specific problems and concerns are, we can talk to city officials and say, "If we want safer communities, we need to put some energy into cleaning the streets, getting rid of the graffiti, and redoing lighting."

C&B: Are these partnerships part of the new community policing philosophy adopted by the Providence Police Department?

Esserman: Absolutely. The three fundamental tenets of our community policy program are problem solving, prevention, and partnership.

C&B: Can you explain the basic community policing concept?

Esserman: Community policing is essentially about breaking down the anonymity of the police officer. It relates to the idea of reducing fear. If we want to create a fearless environment, we must first ensure that people are not afraid of the police. Too often, seeing a uniform makes people feel uneasy. If they get to know the person in the uniform, that fear goes away.

To foster the relationship between police and citizens, community policing calls for decentralized, neighborhood-based police agencies, in which local officers are permanently assigned to communities. This model allows police officers to get to know the neighborhood and the neighborhood to get to know them. Both sides of the badge become more at ease with each other.

Ideally, community policing results in two things. First, crime and fear will decline. And second, partnerships, mutual trust, and respect will develop between the police and the rest of the community. In practice, community policing is hard to do effectively. On the one hand, if you are super crime fighters, but alienate the community, you have failed. Conversely, you can be loved and embraced by the community, but not bring down crime, and then you have also failed. In Providence, we try not to crash onto either shore.

C&B: How have you implemented the community policing model in Providence?

Esserman: The first thing I did was to work with my employees to redesign and reengineer the department. There were 27 patrol beats in this city when I first got here. Do you know why?

C&B: No.

Esserman: You're not alone. Nobody knows why. And even though the city changed, there is no one alive in the building that ever remembers it being done another way. When I asked officers if they thought it made sense, they said, "No." But, no one had ever asked their opinions. So the first thing I did was to get together with my people and say, "How are we going to redesign our department, our home, so that it makes sense?"

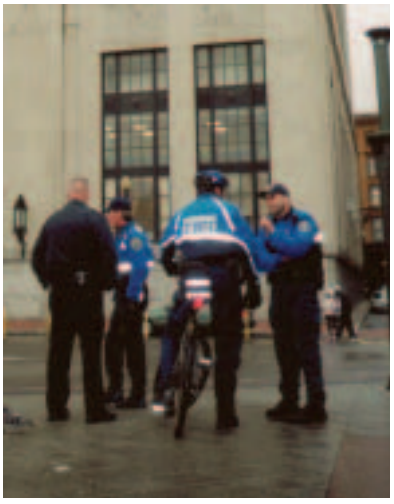
Structure is supposed to follow strategy. We were introducing new strategies, so we needed a new structure. Our community policy concept told us we needed to be a neighborhood-based agency. So we carved up the map. People in Providence live in neighborhoods, so we built a police department around neighborhoods, opening up new local offices in nine neighborhood districts.

C&B: This must have come at some cost to the city.

Esserman: No. Not at all. The new offices were opened at no cost to taxpayers. Everything was donated—space, utilities, volunteers, everything. From universities to local merchants, everyone donated.

C&B: Wow. People must have wanted police presence in their communities.

Esserman: The desire for local police is always there. I saw it happen in 1991 when I opened up neighborhood offices in New Haven, Connecticut, and again in 1998 in Stamford, Connecticut. Everything was donated. Everything.



C&B: Has the decentralized system helped you to reduce crime?

Esserman: Yes, decentralization together with better communication. The department had never had a staff meeting before I arrived. Now every Tuesday, we have one. We go around and each neighborhood's lieutenant briefs the group on the happenings in that district. The special crimes unit gives an update. We have a member of the parole office in the room. Probation is in the room, the district attorney, social services. While we are talking, we project maps of crime locations and photos of suspects on the wall in real time.

With all of these resources in the same room communicating with one another, breakthroughs are made. We discover trends. Information is swapped on suspects' MOs. Links are made between probation offenders and recent crimes. We are being smarter about how we address crime, and we are beginning to wean ourselves off 911 and the radio.

C&B: Do you think that the police should eliminate 911?

Esserman: No, I think we will always have 911. The problem arises when all we have to offer is 911. Let me tell you a story. I have three kids. My oldest, Rolando, is graduating from college this year, so I'm told. And I suspect he will get a job, live in some city far from home, and share an apartment with a couple of friends. Try to start a life. One day, he might come home and find he has been burglarized. His few measly possessions—his bicycle and his TV set—will be gone. Let me ask you a question, "Who will he call first?"

C&B: His parents.

Esserman: Yes. But, how is that possible? He is the son of an American police chief. Doesn't he know that every good American is supposed to first call 911? But, of course, he won't. What do you do when you are the victim of a crime? You call who you know. You call who you trust. And today, most people do not know the police well enough to trust them. In Providence, we are trying to get back into the relationship business—so that people know us and trust us again.

C&B: Is it working?

Esserman: Well, crime is down in Providence for the second year in a row. It is the largest decline in crime and violence the city has seen in more than 30 years. So, those two-part results? Crime is down significantly. Fear is down significantly. And people are embracing the police department. Everyday, people stop me on the street to tell me the difference we are making. My cops tell me they see it in the neighborhoods where they work. Even the editorial pages of the newspaper are writing about it.

C&B: Chief Esserman, can you leave us with one last thought—what is the most important lesson you have learned over the years?

Esserman: I would say that the most important thing I have learned was captured in the words of Mohammad Ali. He was invited to speak at Harvard University, where he gave what I like to think of as his most famous poem. It was also his shortest. He stood up in front of the crowd and in his quintessential moment, he said simply two words, "Me, we." And then he sat down to thunderous applause.

If I have learned anything, it is, "me, we." There is no me, there is no Dean Esserman. I don't have the word "I" in my vocabulary, nor should this police department. It is all about community. It is all about partnership. It is all about collaboration. There is no other strategy for success. No other recipe. This police department is practicing "we" every day, working to make Providence's communities stronger.