

Sharing the Solutions Roundtable

Learning from Leadership: Police Executives

Transcript

Panel Members

- Adrian Diaz
Chief of Police, Seattle, Washington
- Craig Meidl
Chief of Police, Spokane, Washington
- Nicola Smith-Kea, PhD
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Nicola Smith-Kea: Welcome to our *Sharing the Solutions* panel discussion on policing and homelessness. Today, we will be talking with Chief Meidl of Spokane Police Department and Chief Diaz out of the Seattle Police Department.

Smith-Kea: I am Nicola Smith-Kea and today's facilitator. I'll let the panelists introduce themselves before jumping into today's discussion, but Chief Diaz and Chief Meidl, thank you for joining me to discuss an important topic and sharing your knowledge, expertise, and practice on how to better respond to this vulnerable population. Let me start with you, Chief Diaz. Can you just introduce yourself and then we'll move to Chief Meidl?

Adrian Diaz: Yeah, I'm Adrian Diaz. I've been with the department 24 years. Took over as the interim chief in August of 2020, during the midst of a defund movement. And it has been a great time to just get us in a better place to address all of the challenges that Seattle's facing.

Smith-Kea: Thank you.

Craig Meidl: Thank you. I'm Craig Meidl, I'm the chief of police from the Spokane Police Department. I've been with the department now for about 27 years, coming up on five years in the chief's position. And like Chief Diaz said, it's just an exciting time. Every single day is different and brings new challenges.

Smith-Kea: Again, thank you both. So each of you have in place responses that are considered promising and that others are looking to as examples of how to better respond to individuals experiencing homelessness. My first question to you is, I would like for you to start by sharing some of the details about your respective efforts or responses that you have in place to more effectively respond to this population. Chief Meidl, let me start with you.

Meidl: Absolutely. So about eight years ago we started working with one of our municipal judges on a community court. And we actually base it on a model that is in Seattle as well. And so what we knew is that we had struggles like a lot of communities with the homeless population, and we knew several

different things. We weren't going to arrest our way out of solving the homeless population. And we also knew that it was going to be here for a while. This wasn't something that we were going to fix overnight. So we work with one of our local municipal judges and also brought in the municipal prosecutors and public defenders, and started working on establishing this program that has just taken off across the city. Now we have two different site locations for community court. We're working on a third. And they actually will work with our homeless population, but we will also, because we get a lot of the quality-of-life crimes, we will also cite any potential violations in really the core downtown area that primarily are driven by this homeless population into community court.

Meidl: And community court provides things like health care insurance, identity cards, housing, behavioral health, clothing, food, ID cards, veteran programming. So it has just a full menu of services that we basically use to the citation to say, we want to help you, if you will go, and you will work with these different entities to help you. But that's what we're here for. We're here for you long term as well. So that's one of the main programs we've done. We also have a homeless outreach pod. This pod really got started just before COVID hit the nation. That is not only the Spokane Police Department, it's code enforcement. And we had a lot of our nonprofits going out with us multiple times a week to the different camps spread throughout the city area and working with them, and again, trying to connect them with services.

Meidl: COVID's changed that a little bit right now. You just really have more of the governmental entities going out. But we're still out there trying to connect them with services, and that is always the primary goal. And then again, referring them back to community court. And then lastly, I would say that we also designed an internal software program. We have so many different shelters, some of them have different requirements. So what we designed was an internal software program that allows any officer, or code enforcement in the field, to look on their phone, to see who has bed space, who has vacancies and what are their requirements? So we have a lot of different things going on right now.

Smith-Kea: Thank you. Chief Diaz?

Diaz: Yeah. You know, we actually have quite a few things in place because Seattle has always been very, very progressive in how we respond to our unsheltered population, as well as how we deal with people in crisis. So first off, many years ago we created a variety of different multidisciplinary approaches to address a lot of these issues. So we had initially the navigation team that was set up to focus on homeless engagement and outreach to get people into services, but also address some of the public health and public safety issues that our community was facing, which was needles and human waste and a variety of different other challenges that we were facing. And our officers were a part of that level of outreach. As this evolution has changed a little bit, we have received a lot of funding. So we're continuing our service base, but now we are starting to find funding into getting people into motels and hotel opportunities.

Diaz: So that is actually expanding some of our temporary housing initiatives. And so that is allowing us to get more people off the street, and into some level of a controlled setting of care. And so our officers

have been loosely engaged in a variety of different aspects of this, doing community outreach, also being able to provide security.

Diaz: One of the challenges that we have faced because of COVID was, we were getting a large amount of people, because of our outreach efforts, we were getting a large amount of identifying when females were raped in encampments. When COVID hit, we kept people in place and our outreach efforts were loosely affiliated with a lot of NGOs—nongovernmental agencies—to do some of that outreach. And we have not actually been able to see the amount of rapes that are occurring. So these are one of the challenges because of COVID that we have been facing, but we continue to do a lot of outreach. But we coupled that unit now with our crisis response unit. And our crisis response unit is not only dealing with people that are sheltered, but it allows us to have that expansion to the unsheltered population.

Smith-Kea: Great. Thank you both. So, I started by saying that you both have promising practices, and I will add to that, that the success or effectiveness of a program is largely dependent on the leadership. I think we've all heard this, or used this statement that's at one point or another, leadership matters. How have you, as police executives, helped to drive a more human-centered approach in responding to individuals experiencing homelessness? And Chief Diaz, I'll start with you this time.

Diaz: I think this is one of the big things that, at least from my perspective, is we've put a lot of work on police departments to do, to engage in homeless work, to engage in people in crisis. And our big push is really, fund organizations that do this level of work. To really kind of take it off the police officers' hands, so we can then kind of go and focus on our core functions. But we still aren't engaged in it. We know that when we're dealing with people in crisis, that there are some things that our nonprofits are just not going to be able to do. So we still want to have that level of engagement. We still want to have that outreach, because we build those relationships that help reduce those levels of use of force that could exist, or could occur.

Diaz: And so really for us in the last couple years, or the last year, is really transitioning into making sure that there's really thoughtful investments into our BIPOC communities, into those organizations that are serving our communities of color, that are at a higher rate, that have disparate impacts in our homeless community. And so now that we've created a lot more funding for those groups, and a lot more outreach and a lot more temporary shelters, that has helped us reduce our need to be really, on a daily basis, engaged on a daily basis with people that are in crisis, and people that are homeless. We just also have to be mindful that it doesn't completely exonerate our time doing that work. Like we still have to engage, because those relationships are so valuable, and to build. And so that is just a different approach as we continue to evolve our work in the unsheltered population and the homeless community.

Smith-Kea: Thank you, Chief Diaz. Chief Meidl?

Meidl: Yeah, I would echo what you said. You know, leadership really starts at the top. And for us, how we really encourage our officers to interact with the homeless population, it starts before they're even hired, it's the type of people that you're hiring, the expectations that you have during the final interview. So I'm fortunate, I only have about 350 commissioned officers. So I'm the final interview with every candidate before they finally get hired, which provides me an opportunity to not only gauge what type of

person we're potentially going to invite into our ranks, but also starts modeling and setting that expectation for them. And expressing to them that, how we treat the community, it not only benefits the community but it also benefits the department as well. So we all benefit when we can act with that professionalism, compassion. So it's the modeling of vocalizing and showing support for the struggles of our homeless, and actually embracing the fact that these are people that are struggling. Oftentimes, but for the grace of God, that could be one of us that was out there.

Meidl: And we do know that there are homeless officers that are out there as well. It's also the word choice that I use when we're discussing the homeless, not demeaning or dehumanizing them by any means at all. And then again, just reinforcing those expectations from day one. Also, what we did is—not only as it relates to the homeless, but how we interact with the entire community—is we actually have the department decide what our values are. And the only thing I told them was, I don't want eight or nine values that look really good on the front page of our policy manual that nobody knows, nobody remembers, and there was no buy-in from the department. It was me sitting in the ivory tower and saying, here's your values? It's like, well, they're probably like, well, those may be your values, but not ours.

Meidl: So the only guidance I gave them was, I only want three or four values, and I want them to be what we strive for every day. And I took an entire cross spectrum of commissioned and noncommissioned, line level, no higher than captain. And they came up with our values that, every time we get a compliment about how our officers interacted with the public, I respond to them and I tried to reinforce those values in there as well. And then I also model behavior by encouraging innovative programs. And what agencies, what nonprofits are we partnering with, and really letting the department know that we are going to be partnering with these agencies. And we're going to be partnering with them for a long time so that they understand this is a new way of doing business that we probably didn't even think about 10 years ago, but it's a new norm for us now. And I think that just sends the message of, this is police work in the 21st century. This is a prong of police work.

Smith-Kea: Excellent. Thank you both so much. And you both mentioned just the importance of this collaboration within the department. We know that our boots on the ground, our supervisors have had to respond to these situations which have created some trauma in their own lives, in the responding officers' lives. I think sometimes us, as a society, we forget the impact that it has on the officers. I would love for you to discuss how you encourage a more trauma-informed response—not just in response to those who are on the other end of the call for service, but also for the individual officers. How do we encourage self-care in a time of vulnerability, and a constant response to populations that are so vulnerable? Chief Diaz, let me start with you.

Diaz: I think this is a great example. We have set out a model of how we respond to people in crisis, and we have done a lot in regards to de-escalation. And that helps us be able to respond to the community's needs. But coming back to the officer needs, it really is about wellness and our investments, and wellness in our officers. And that is the struggle. These officers that specialize in this level of work need additional care. We know that they're responding to, not only is every officer responding to sometimes the worst situations in our society, but it's a population that is completely at a different level of the worst

circumstances in our society. They're unsheltered, they're homeless. They don't know when their next meal is going to happen.

Diaz: They're typically lacking medical care. And they're victims to a variety of crimes, from rape to shootings, to stabbings, to you name it. And those officers are responding daily. And they're doing it with such levels of care. So that really is important that we monitor and watch them to ensure that we have the level of care for them as well, that we're providing psychologists for their needs. That we're also providing some level of physical fitness, or the ability to access good nutrition. And so our wellness unit, we just actually were a recipient of an app that allows us to do some nutrition work. It allows us to do some fitness work. A couple of our staff are actually providing physical fitness. We have psychologists on our staff. We have our chaplain that also is doing work internally.

Diaz: And this is really, I think, as more agencies in the last several years have created a lot more investments in this area, because we saw nationally suicides kind of on the rise in policing. But specifically into this area, you really have to make sure that you're caring for those officers. They're specifically going into those encampments on a daily basis because they are seeing the tragedy at its worst time in our lives. And so I think that, and they're also having to be exposed. I had an officer that had a needle go through his boot. I've had some of the situations that are completely dire public health situations. And so they're also having to deal with that, potentially—health hazards. And you're also trying to not only deal with their wellness, but you're also trying to deal with their physical wellness as well. Because they are going into environments that are not for anybody to walk through. And you're also trying to make sure you take care of those needs as well.

Meidl: Yeah, that's great. I would echo what Chief Diaz said as well. In fact, we are both in a state where this is such an important topic that the training commission, which certifies every commissioned officer and deputy in Washington state, mandated two hours of training this year. And that two hours was really on wellness. And the concept behind that is that you're not in any position to help other people if you yourself are hurting and carrying all this trauma around. So that was very well received by our department. We have to be emotionally stable ourselves before we're going to be in any position to help others. We also rely heavily on our peer assistance team, and these are peer officers. And by law, by state law, and they have the same privilege in communication as a counselor or a doctor would have.

Meidl: In other words, officers are able to share things with them that those peer assistant team members cannot be compelled to reveal, unless of course the officer is a danger to themselves. So there's a lot of confidentiality in those communications. And we rely on the peer assistance team heavily for—whether it's a critical incident, or especially a traumatizing call that our officers deal with all the time—to reach out and touch bases with the officers, to check in and see how they're doing. We are also going to a new employee assistance program. Each city typically will have their employee assistance program. But what we're finding is that a lot of the counselors related to that aren't really well-versed in first responder trauma. And so what we have done is we're basically trying a year with a first responder, in essence employee assistance program, that is specifically for our officers, and unique things that they see every single day.

Meidl: One of the things I do as well to help with the officers is I try to be visible. I try to make as many roll calls as I can. Every single in-service, I carve out a half hour to talk about department updates. But then just to open it up to them as well and find out what's going on unfiltered from the line level. And I always tell them, okay, what are you frustrated about? What are you angry about? How many of you said, why did you do this, why didn't you do that? And I tell them, there is no inappropriate question, ask me anything you want, to give them that unfiltered access. Because there's a lot of times people like Chief Diaz and I, we don't hear a lot of things. And then by the time we do hear about it we'll tell our staff, I had no idea. And they're shocked that we would have no idea that we're not hearing these things.

Meidl: So trying to be available as much as we can, again, a little bit easier for me because of the makeup of my department. And then I would also say that self-care for ourselves, especially as leaders, is extremely, extremely important. And I think the first year or two as a chief, probably more like two or three years, I was running nonstop, as probably most chiefs should when you first get in that position and you're trying to learn the lay of the land and establish yourself.

Meidl: But that pace for that first two or three years, you can't maintain that. Not without some kind of serious impact to your emotional health, to your relationships, to your friendships. At some point you have to start putting up those boundaries as well. And again, it's important. First couple years you're not going to, but having boundaries as a leader yourself. There's a saying that you cannot serve from an empty vessel. And so for us as leaders as well, it's important that we keep ourselves filled so that we can also fill those that are working with us. And respond in a good manner instead of, I'm so busy, I'm so exhausted, just get this off my plate. And you may not be making the best decision.

Smith-Kea: I really like that. And I'll use that moving forward. You can't serve from an empty vessel. Thank you for that one. I recall a few years ago, because I've been in this space of policing and homelessness for a few years. And I recall a few years ago a police chief saying to me, people often say to implement these responses are too expensive. And my response has always been, in the long run, it will be more expensive not to implement these effective responses. What would you, or what do you say to other departments or jurisdictions, that are on the fence about implementation of a more intentional, planned, data-driven approach to responding to this vulnerable population, to individuals experiencing homelessness? And what recommendations do you have to those who want to do better, but simply do not know where to begin? Chief Meidl, let me start with you.

Meidl: Absolutely. I feel like our efforts to go down this road of working with the homeless population, in all its different cogs that really make up a homeless-responsive community, was actually a very easy sell. Like many communities, we struggled with different community expectations as well. We had one segment of the community that wants us to be completely hands-off with the homeless: Don't do anything with them, don't criminalize homeless. And then we have another segment of the community that wants us to cite and book and arrest for every single thing. And you have law enforcement right in the middle trying to figure out, how do we work through this? So what we realized is that we need to collaborate with the community. As law enforcement, we're not going to fix this problem by ourselves. And I think our department, because we'd had several years of trying to work through these issues

before some of these programs came on board, they understood that we needed to do something different.

Meidl: We have to try looking at what other innovative programs can we do? There's that saying that if you keep doing what you're doing, you're going to keep getting what you're getting. Or another way of saying it is the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting a different result. So I feel like the fields were fertile and right for us to try something different. So that made it much easier in our community.

Meidl: I would say that they also realized that we do keep dealing with the same people over and over again. We do spend an inordinate amount of our time. And then if there were violations of the law, we had no other choice because people were calling to complain that there was law violations, we took them to jail. Well, that just became a revolving door. So they also understood that this is going to not only save us time, if we can get this person long-term help, it's going to free us up so that we can go on to other higher priorities as well. And that's really what that fertile ground that we had to start with. And it just made this such an easy process for us in terms of getting the buy in.

Smith-Kea: Chief Diaz?

Diaz: Yeah. Chief Meidl, he's actually hit almost everything that I would love to say. I am looking at, as we kind of reimagine policing, as we start to really focus on our thought of getting, to me, getting down to our core function, most large departments, or most police agencies are struggling to make sure that they have enough staffing to do the job that they need to do. And we're finding ourselves being torn into a lot of these social issues that aren't necessarily the most appropriate use of police resources to do. And so for me, it's really about making sure, to the point of what Chief Meidl was saying, it's collaboration. We know that we should be engaged in some aspect of this, but we need to make sure that we bring in the right and appropriate resources. Our mental health professionals, we need to bring in those that are focused on good levels of social services. Case management, housing, employment opportunities.

Diaz: And we have to make sure that we create this level of wraparound services. We know the police department doesn't own those areas, but we have to be engaged because there are other risks where officers can help mitigate those risks. Whether it's safety issues, or whether it's some level of outreach to prevent potential other violence from occurring, or victimization in our encampments. We know in some of our encampments, we know that there's human trafficking. We know that there's a large quantities of drug sales and robberies, and all sorts of other different types of crime. And that's the reason why it's so important for the police department to be engaged in that prevention, intervention work prior to becoming a violent assault, or something else occurring that is part of the criminal activity.

Diaz: But I do think that I just want to make sure that we don't become the tip of the spear for a lot of this work. That we really, as police agencies, have to make sure that we advocate for sufficient funding in a lot of these social services so people don't have that expectation. Because at the end of the day, it's training an officer that should be focused on how we provide a service, and how we provide, I should say, a police service. And trying to de-escalate a lot of situations, and not necessarily into our homeless work, and dealing with people with crisis that are actually could have better training. And actually

probably cost a lot less because they know that specific level of work. But be also mindful of, we still have a role to play in this work as well.

Smith-Kea: Great. Thank you both. I think I'll end by asking just a general and open question about any final words of advice or wisdom that you want to share with those who will be watching this video. Chief Meidl?

Meidl: Yeah. Thank you. You know, law enforcement five years ago is different than law enforcement today. And five years from now will probably look different as well. So it's so important that agencies need to constantly have a heart, and an eye towards evolving and progressing. Look at what's working, try new things. If it's not working, then you're absolutely in a position where you should try something different. There is no more of an important time than now in law enforcement where you need to collaborate. You need to work with other agencies.

Meidl: Sir Robert Peel said that law enforcement is not the only entity responsible for the safety of the community. We're the only ones who get paid full-time to do it. And we need to have that community involvement. And you, as an agency, you can't do this without that community involvement. And the journey of a thousand miles begins with that first step. So take that first step of identifying key partners in the community that have that same passion that you do, and latch onto them. And feed off of each other, get strength from each other, and just start moving forward at looking at what's going to work in your community. And you'll find that at some point, you'll look back and you'll see that you have traveled a thousand miles.

Diaz: Now at this time in our history, policing is so much more difficult. And we've asked our police departments to take on so many of the challenges that our social industries have not been able to either have the capacity to deal with, or have the ability to support or do in the amount of quantity that we need to have them do. And now chiefs have a very short lifespan. This last year in almost, I think, 35 different major cities have had to replace their chief. And there's a higher expectation for police service. And we also have to make sure that we know our community, that we respond to our community's needs, and that we're doing exactly what our community expects of us. And we have to manage their expectations. And when it comes to the work in social services and homelessness, we have to figure out how do we collaborate with those organizations to support that level of work?

Diaz: And it allows us to be a lot more effective in how we serve our community. And I think one of the struggles that we've constantly had to do is just, we take on more and more responsibility. And we're usually given the tool of that power of arrest. And in this type of work, this is not what we do. This is not where you use that power of arrest to be effective in our work. So that's the reason why the collaboration is so important. And so I would make sure that you take a real good look at your agency, what you want out of it, what's your expectations for it? To me, it's about service and excellence. Everything that we do is to serve our community, and we serve it with the highest level of excellence to the community.

Diaz: And there are areas that we've got to tell community to say, that is not our responsibility, and we will support that level of work. And that helps manage those community's expectations, because if not,

we will continue on in finding ourselves at five years, still having a lot of scrutiny in every level of work that we do. So I want to make sure that people know that we have to own what we do, and not expand out those levels of work. And really have people that know that work to support them in that work. So, thank you.

Smith-Kea: And I want to take this time to thank you both so much for your time. This discussion has been enlightening. We spoke about the importance of leadership and partnership within the department. The importance of partnership outside of the department is also really important. Collaboration matters. We know that. There are number of stakeholders who need to be involved in a more effective response. And we need to move away from working in silos and working more collaboratively to change what happens. Also important is a need to be more intentional and mindful about how we hire, and the policies and procedures that are implemented to support not only those on the other end of the 911 call, but also officers ensuring their safety and wellness.

Smith-Kea: And also the importance of being flexible and open to change. So again, I would like to thank you all. I would like to thank the panel for their expertise, for your expertise, and thank you all for your time and commitment to this work.

Meidl: Excellent. Thank you very much. It was my honor.