

Sharing the Solutions Roundtable

Outreach Teams and Peer Partners: Police Working with People with Lived Experience

Transcript

Panel Members:

- Christopher Belton
Peer Navigator, Catholic Community Services
- Lt. Amy King
Olympia (Washington) Police Department
- Fred Linker
Peer Specialist, Wichita, Kansas
- Officer Nathan Schwiethale
Wichita (Kansas) Police Department, Homeless Outreach Team (H.O.T.)
- Panel facilitated by Anne Larson
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Anne Larson: Welcome. My name is Anne Larson, and I'm an outreach specialist at the Olympia Police Department in Olympia, Washington. I'm a civilian employee that supervises the crisis response unit and Familiar Faces program. Today, we're going to be talking to officers in Wichita, Kansas, and Olympia, Washington, that partner with peers in their outreach work that they do with homeless communities and marginalized communities. I'd like to introduce our panel. Lieutenant King?

Amy King: Hi, I'm Amy King. I work for the Olympia Police Department [OPD]. I've been here for just under 22 years. And in 2018, we stood up a downtown walking patrol unit, which I supervise and have supervised for about the last four years. I worked very closely with our crisis response unit and our Familiar Faces program.

Christopher Belton: Hi everyone. My name is Christopher Belton. I am a peer specialist here in Olympia, Washington. And I've been doing this job for over two and a half years, and I enjoy every minute of it. Thank you. Nice to meet you guys.

Nathan Schwiethale: Hi, I'm Officer Nate Schwiethale, Wichita Police Department. I work on our Homeless Outreach Team [HOT]. I've been an officer for 20 years, working in the downtown area with our homeless population. And I started our Homeless Outreach Team in 2013.

Fred Linker: My name is Fred Linker. I'm a peer specialist, homeless outreach peer specialist, here in Wichita, Kansas. And I've been doing outreach for about 15 years now.

Larson: Awesome. So, Officer Schwiethale, will you kick us off and tell us about how your team got started, and what your mission and vision behind your team are?

Schwiethale: Well, we started, really because for the last 20 years I worked in the downtown area and we saw a revolving door of homeless, for vagrancy-type crimes, going into jail, the prison system, or coming back out and going back to the streets. And we just continued to see the same 911 calls on the same individuals. And that's when we realized we had to be doing something different. So we started looking around the country, looking at some best practices, and some cities that weren't maybe getting involved in lawsuits for violating civil rights and those type of things. And we'd come to realize that once homeless people were getting housed or into some programs, we stopped getting those 911 calls, those vagrancy-type issues. And so that's where we realized we needed to be involved in, into the outreach process.

Schwiethale: So our main goal, our focus is not on arresting them and trying to put them in jail and tickets and fines. It's actually try to divert them away from that, in lieu of services, to eventually the ultimate goal of helping them get housed. So we have a standard of performance measures by our city manager, in order to house over 100 homeless per year. And we've accomplished that goal since we've started.

Larson: That's awesome. So how did you and Fred meet, and how has your relationship evolved from that initial meeting?

Schwiethale: Well, early on when we first started, we had heard about the infamous "Rooster," who'd been homeless for 20 years, and I wanted to gain the respect for all the officers as our new unit. They didn't know what to expect from a Homeless Outreach Team, because in 2013, there wasn't a lot of police Homeless Outreach Teams back then, so it was kind of a new concept. So I went out and found Rooster and started working with him. And we worked to help him get into some treatment for his drinking issues and substance abuse and helped him turn his life around. And we've helped him through some housing programs, he got multiple jobs. And now he's living right here in this home right now, we're in his kitchen. So it's been a great journey, and just one example among many, working with Rooster, Fred.

Larson: That's awesome. So Fred, I'm only going to be calling you Rooster for the next 30 minutes, because I love that. But after 21 years of being homeless, what was it about Officer Schwiethale that made that connection? Tell us about what happened.

Linker: Well, when I first became homeless, I really didn't stay around the downtown area. I didn't want to be around the illegal activities and all that and everything. But Nate had ended up finding me, and he sat and had a talk with me and asked me, he says, "What do you want to do? Do you want to make some changes?" And I said, "What's my options?" And he said, "Well," he says, "if you trust me," he says, "I'll help you get through this." He says, "But there will be some stipulations and guidelines that you will have to follow, in order to be successful in the program. You got to be able to change." And he gave me the opportunity. And ever since then, we've become like brothers. And there's a lot of officers out on the

streets that look down on the homeless, but the HOT team knows exactly what they're dealing with, how to deal with the mental issues of the homeless out there and help them through their situations.

Linker: Because if they didn't care, you'd just be a revolving door in and out of jail. And I do a lot of outreach myself, since I've dealt with Nate over the 21 years. And I will go out to the streets, and I don't go out there much, but when I'm able to, but I will go out there and talk to the guys and see what they need or what their plans are, what they plan on doing for the rest of their life, living on the streets or making their lives a little bit better. So that's been a blessing.

Larson: That's awesome. That's pretty incredible. So Lieutenant King, can you talk a little bit about what is happening here in Olympia, Washington?

King: Yeah. So, in 2018, OPD stood up a new walking patrol unit. We were seeing a really significant increase in our unhoused population, particularly in our downtown area. And so I ended up being in charge of that team. And as we would go out, we started making relationships with people, meeting people, and started seeing some of the same things that Officer Schwiethale was talking about, the same calls regarding the same people, the same issues. And things that we knew we were not necessarily the best equipped or had the resources necessarily to address in a way that was going to last. And so we then developed our peer program and my officers really started connecting, introducing the peers to folks that we were meeting downtown, hoping that we could figure out what those folks really needed or wanted, and then helping them get those things accomplished and reach those goals. And so we've been going strong for the last four years and have seen some really miraculous things happen, through building those relationships.

Larson: Thanks. So Chris?

Belton : Hi, everybody.

Larson: Why do you think it's important for folks with lived experiences to be a part of a team that works with homeless individuals?

Belton: I feel that having people with lived experience gives us authenticity and can help us vouch for the work done by officers. And also, being a person who was out there in the streets, seeing how life was out there, I decided to want to be a positive influence on people that are out there, being that I was a part of that.

Larson: Totally. So, Officer Schwiethale, have you had experiences where folks like Fred or folks with lived experiences have vouched for you, given you credibility, when you're out working in the camps?

Schwiethale: Oh yeah, absolutely. I'll be honest with you, when I first started our Homeless Outreach Team, my biggest fear was that we had spent years and years and years just doing traditional policing, writing homeless people tickets, taking them to jail. And now all of a sudden, we walk up and say, "Hey, we're doing homeless outreach, so we want you to trust us now." And so my biggest fear was they weren't going to trust us. And so I knew to do that, I wanted to go after some of the leaders of the homeless, and if we could help them, we were hoping that they would spread the word. And to be

honest with you, one of the first ones was Fred. And so when we contacted him, a lot of the other homeless were standoffish towards us, but he gave us a chance.

Schwiethale: And because of that, I think our team became successful. Because overnight, you got me connected with Gator, we got him into housing. You got me connected with Kenny, we got him into housing. You got me connected with Greg, we got him into housing. Next thing I know, it's a domino effect and our phone is blowing up overnight with homeless, hearing about how we helped Rooster, the king of all homeless. And they wanted an opportunity to work with us as well. So that was probably the most instrumental thing that we did, was just immediately start partnering with our homeless, and Fred as an example.

Larson: That's awesome. So, Fred, it sounds like you are a huge part of why this outreach is successful and why it's important. How do you see yourself and your role in that, paying it forward or encouraging other folks to do what you're doing?

Linker: Well, for me, it's like partnering up with Nate and the other officers in Homeless Outreach Team. I've been there, I wanted to spread the word. And like they said, yes, it's all about trust. And if there is no trust, then nothing's going to move forward out of this.

Larson: Yep.

Linker: So, that's why I go out when I can. And I'd take and go out, pass out some of his cards.

Larson: Yeah.

Linker: That way, if they needed to get a hold of him, "Want to make a change? Here you go, here's a card. Trust me, this is a good program."

Larson: Yeah.

Linker: So but yeah, I do spend a lot of outreach time when I can, because I love paying it back, forward, because I've been there. And don't want to do it again.

Larson: Yeah. And it sounds like you really trust that, when you give that card to someone, that you know that Officer Schwiethale is going to get back to them and respond. And you trusting him is that effect, throughout homeless camps throughout Kansas. So that seems super awesome. So I guess the next question is for Lieutenant King and Officer Schwiethale, it sounds like trust and relationships and partnerships are such a big part of having successful outreach teams. Can you talk a little bit about that, Lieutenant King, about relationships and trusts and partnerships, and how you've seen that work be an important part of the work that you do?

King: Yeah. I'm not sure I can say it better than Fred. Trust is everything. And it happens—we've got to remember that trust is built in those little moments. So it's doing what you say you're going to do, and whether it's a big thing or a little thing. And I think that not only as in building trust with the people that we serve, but with the team that we work with. So there has to be trust between officers and peers, as

well as officers and the people we're serving, or the people that peers are serving. So it's really important to make sure that we have the right people in the right seats on the bus. And so that we have the right relationships and can build from a foundation of trust.

King: And the other thing is that we have, over the years, we've found ourselves really relying on the peers. And so it is far more likely that I'm going to call a peer, than I'm probably going to call a service provider when I run into something, because there is that trust there. And I know that they are going to respond and I know that I can trust them to vicariously build trust with me, with the person that we're serving. Which is just another way of saying what has been said already. So we have to start with that foundation.

Larson: Nate?

Schwiethale: I think one thing we try to focus on is really sustaining our partnerships and working together with our providers, with the homeless piece as well. And one of the things we try to do is, obviously, we're trying to work on grants together. There's a lot of grants where, especially with the Federal Government, that they want to see that partnership that you're working on. In fact, just this year, we worked with the COPS Office and got a grant working with our housing department, on a specific area of homelessness and vagrancy issues. And so, building those partnerships, working on grants together, that's going to build that unity and that trust. So they're going to be reaching out to you, you're reaching out to them. And that's what we have seen have been an effective model.

Larson: Just recognizing that when you look out the windshield, and like Lieutenant King said, and you have the right folks on the right seats of the bus, you realize that we all have a common goal. We all want to see folks not calling 911, we all want to see folks getting connected to services, we all want to see folks being stable, medically, and behavioral health, and substance use. And so really sharing a vision around the work, and then bringing partners in and building that trust and relationship that, when a housing provider calls us, we'll respond. And when we call a housing provider and like, "Hey, do you have a shelter bed tonight? We've got this person." They're like, "Yep. We know you're there for us, we'll be there for you." So that's kind of how we approach it here, in Olympia. All right. Fred, Chris, if you had to try make a recommendation, say what would make the perfect peer specialist, or peer navigator, what would you say would make a great peer? Chris. I'll do Chris first.

Belton : Excuse me. I think a great peer would be a person that can set boundaries, who has a big heart. Because we're dealing with people who, they constantly change, day by day, and we have to get up to speed with those guys. Some days they're harder than others. But have somebody that is willing to take the hits and stand by somebody's side that needs to have somebody there, in their life. Being again that I lived in a hard situation when I was out there, I had people like Anne and people like Amy, that was definitely there when I was out there. And just to have that shoulder to be able to lean on and to get the inspiration to do what I do today. So definitely big heart, definitely boundaries, and a person that just cares.

Linker: For me as a peer specialist, I've been there, I've done that, I've spent too many years out on the streets. For me to go out, it's my gratification to be able to go out and go ahead and get back into

meeting with all the homeless guys and everything. I know where every camp is pretty well, here in Wichita. If you need to find somebody, I can find them. But yeah, I enjoy going out there and expressing my situation to them, and how I have overcome from where I've been. And to just trust me, it's a lot about trust, willingness to change, and opportunities. And that's what I offer them, when I go out there. And I've got several of them that call me on the phone that are homeless, just to check in from time to time. And which that makes me feel good, because I've got them to open up. And they're willing to talk and maybe wanting to make a change, in their lives and their living situations.

Larson: Yeah. So on these screens we have two law enforcement officers, and then two folks with former lived experience. And I think sometimes, what you said, Fred, or I think I heard you say is, you have to take a risk every once in a while. And so I want to hear from the peers, what do they think that officers need to know about working with peers, or how they could be open to working with peers. And then understanding that risk goes both ways, I guess, looking to Lieutenant King and Officer Schwiethale, what would you say to officers about any hesitancy that they would have about partnering with a formerly incarcerated individual, or partnering with somebody that's formerly homeless? So, I'll ask Chris first.

Belton : I would say that, you want to give that person a chance and you have to learn that individual. Somebody like me could be just viewed as like, "Oh, he's a big guy, and all of this. And he had an anger problem." But I guess, once people get used to you and get to know you and at least have a conversation with you to let you know that you exist, at least. Then I think that that's what officers need. And trust and stuff like that. And just having an understanding of the people that they're working with. And that's my recommendation.

Linker: And for my recommendation about it is that, me dealing with the officers here in Wichita, it's all about trust. And that was my main fear, trust and being able to want to trust them, because you hear so—and plus, a lot of people out there, like in my position, I never knew I had mental issues, until it was pointed out by Officer Nate. He says, "You want to go get an evaluation?" Bam, got an evaluation. Yes, I had a problem. I didn't even know that. And now that I'm on meds and stuff like that, it's brought me closer to the police department. Not only that, I can relate more, being on my meds, and being able to figure out situations and solutions to help these individuals out and be successful.

Belton : Also want to say that consistency is key.

Linker: Yes.

Larson: Mm-hmm.

Belton : As long as the officers know that you can't just—this dude might be having a bad day and it's like, okay, whatever. You have to stay and stick with these people, because of the fact that they could be coming from broken homes, and never felt love before from anybody.

Schwiethale: Right.

Belton : So I feel like the consistency and the love, and the respect and humanizing people are a very intricate part of this.

Larson: For sure.

King: Me next? Yeah. I've done this job for a long time, and as I look back over my career, there are definitely some highlights and some pivotal moments. And I think for most of my career, I would've said I was a good officer. And I think I was, I think I was the best officer I knew how to be at any given time. But probably one of the biggest benchmarks or pivotal points in my career has been doing this work. And it's taught me a lot about myself, and it's taught me a lot about the places and the areas I really probably wasn't a very good officer, because I wasn't listening, I wasn't seeing the full human being in front of me. I was seeing a problem that I was responding to. And I made the mistake of seeing that person as a problem, instead of seeing them as a person that has problems.

King: Which is just like me, right? I have problems too. They might look different, they might sound different. But at the end of the day, they're really not that different. And I'm not that different from the people that I'm serving, in fact, we're a lot more alike. And that sounds a little cliché, but doing this work really brought that home for me. And so, I think from an officer standpoint, I echo the things of trust and consistency, but I also just encourage officers to maybe take a step back and take a look inward and ask yourself, "Are you listening? Are you really listening? Are you really seeing the person in all of their humanity that's standing in front of you, and trying to serve them as best that you can? Or are you seeing a problem that you've been called to and you have to respond to?" So that's been very meaningful to me. Life-changing, in fact, for me.

Schwiethale: For us, I recognized I never had substance abuse issues in my life, and so it was going to be hard for me to relate on that level and talk about those things, like Fred for an example. So one thing that we started doing as a police department, was we reached out to our substance abuse center and started talking about peer mentors. And they actually have a peer mentor program. So we connected Fred with a peer mentor. So we can get people housed all day long, but you still have to have that peer mentor there to help them through stuff and continue on their success. And so he did that, he graduated from it and was successful in that area. He is a peer himself. So, that's been a really good program.

Schwiethale: I encourage police departments to reach out to those providers that offer that service, and start connecting those individuals with a peer, if you can. And that's been really, really great for us. And the other advice I'd have is just to not give up, you're going to see, I think the average alcoholic will relapse seven times before they finally get sober. I think Fred hit every single one of those seven.

Linker: Yeah.

Schwiethale: But we never gave up on him, and he was willing to get back up on that horse and try again. And here he is, successful. So I just want to tell officers, don't get frustrated. If you've worked on somebody and they fell back into hard times again, if you keep trying, it does work. And he's one example among hundreds of others, where we didn't give up and now they're successful.

King: And can I just say on top of that, I totally agree. And I've used that thought process with my own self, to give me some perspective of how I have tried to make changes of all kinds of different things in my life. And I challenge anyone listening, if you think about the things you've tried to change in your life,

how difficult that is. And sometimes it's just simple, something like, "I'm going to drink more water today, or forever. I'm going to drink more water every day." And how difficult it is and how many times you might fail at that, or not meet that goal, before you start doing it consistently. And so, yeah, we can't give up, we got to hang in there.

Larson: Well, thank you guys all, for sharing your experiences today. We hope that the audience found this helpful and useful, and can take some of the recommendations. And thank you for spending your time with us.