

# Community Policing in Northern Nevada

## A Summary

### Introduction

Across the nation there have been a number of officer-involved shootings that have widened the division between the police and the public. In northern Nevada, an officer-involved shooting and a spike in in-custody deaths have prompted community concern over policing strategies. The Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) (Task Force) was developed in response to growing friction between the police and the communities they serve. It proposed a set of itemized best practices that offer guidance to law enforcement agencies to “help reduce crime while building public trust within the communities they serve.”

To address community concerns and improve community policing in Nevada, three northern Nevada law enforcement agencies, in partnership with a local Task Force of community members, commissioned the Guinn Center to assess their current policies and procedures against the itemized best practices found in the Task Force and propose recommendations that could address gaps. Our findings revealed that the three northern Nevada law enforcement agencies have incorporated many of the best practices put forth by the Task Force to varying degrees. However, there remains opportunities to improve in several areas.

Based on recurring themes and specific requests to focus on data, hiring, recruitment, and training, the Guinn Center organized its set of recommendations into five categories:

- I. Public Accountability and Transparency
- II. Hiring and Recruitment
- III. Training
- IV. Internal Policy Development
- V. Human Capital and Officer Wellness

Here, we summarize our full-length report that may assist northern Nevada law enforcement agencies in developing effective community policing strategies that align with Task Force recommendations.

### Public Accountability and Transparency

Open data is a valuable opportunity to foster public accountability and transparency. When policies and procedures are made available for public review, agencies can be held accountable and the public can be reassured that law enforcement decisions are consistent with stated policies. The Task Force recommends that agencies “establish a culture of transparency and accountability” by publicly posting department policies and available data on the department’s website. Data can benefit agencies by tracking officer performance which allows departments to alter policies and procedures if necessary.

While northern Nevada law enforcement agencies have tracked and reported certain accountability measures (i.e. clearance rates), other measures such as use of force and in-custody deaths should be made available for public review. All data should be disaggregated by demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and geographic location) and reviewed routinely to identify trends. Additionally, agencies should organize meetings with community representatives to discuss data collection, data analysis, and data reporting.

Furthermore, agencies should do more to incorporate community input. The Task Force recommends that “some form of civilian oversight of law enforcement is important to strengthen trust with the community.” Some agencies have informal advisory boards such as Reno’s Chief’s Impact Panel, but few if any have formal civilian boards. Thus, agencies should establish a formal community advisory committee, if one has not already been instituted.

Lastly, northern Nevada law enforcement agencies should partner with one another to develop a valid survey instrument of community residents, with responses disaggregated by gender, race/ethnicity, age, and zip code. Surveys can provide valuable insight into community attitudes toward police. This is especially important for certain populations, such as immigrant communities, that may have low levels of trust in police departments. Results can help police departments modify existing policies and procedures, potentially strengthening trust and accountability.

### **Hiring and Recruitment**

Hiring and recruiting diverse officers should be prioritized to “improve understanding and effectiveness in dealing with all communities,” Diversity includes more than just race and gender, as it could include cultural background, language, and experience. Increasing diversity in a police department can foster systemic reform and promote public trust in law enforcement.

Northern Nevada law enforcement agencies have made positive strides in appealing to applicants from underrepresented communities. For example, the Washoe County Sheriff’s office has collaborated with local community organization to implement “outreach strategies aimed at attracting applications from diverse communities.” Even with outreach efforts, the demographic composition of northern Nevada law enforcement agencies is not reflective of the demographic profile of their communities. Therefore, agencies should attempt to recruit more from underrepresented communities.

In the hiring process, there is greater attrition among underrepresented groups. Given that the pipeline to recruits is limited, northern agencies must be flexible in their hiring efforts. For example, agencies should allow applicants to retake the physical test, which could aid in retaining more minority applicants. Additionally, agencies should expand career pathways by working with local school districts to establish a Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security Career and Technical Education (CTE) program to expand the duration and content of recruitment efforts. Law enforcement agencies should also routinely update websites about the hiring process, job requirements, and other meaningful deadlines. Attrition and retention rates should be tracked and reviewed to identify ways to retain officers, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

## **Training**

Training that addresses the needs of the community while simultaneously combating crime is important in promoting healthy police-community relations. To achieve this balance, agencies should identify core trainings and conduct a training audit of these policies regularly.

Observations over existing data and interviews conducted with northern Nevada law enforcement agencies on core training policies revealed gaps in current training received. De-escalation training is limited, as community representatives have commented that officers lack training to identify interventions appropriate for different kinds of crisis situations. Balancing against financial and human capital costs, agencies should attempt to review de-escalation training regularly to ensure that training is comprehensive and reflects best practices. Data should be collected and publicly reported on the number of hours of de-escalation training officers receive at the Northern Nevada Law Enforcement Academy (a Nevada POST-certified Academy) and through in-service training.

Implicit bias training is also limited in duration and scope. While some agencies such as the Washoe County Sheriff's Office offer in-service training for officers, implicit bias training that is standalone is needed to best train officers. Similarly, data should be collected and publicly reported on the number of hours of implicit bias training officers receive as well as the percentage of the force who received training.

In addition, community policing officers do not receive specialized training prior to assuming their new role. Specialized training could increase the effectiveness of community policing officers by teaching the best methods for successful interactions. The Task Force recommends partnering with community representatives to ensure high-quality training. Therefore, agencies should collaborate and partner with local advocacy groups to provide specialized training and/or organize on-site visits for officers.

## **Internal Policy Development**

Internal policy development remains a vital component in developing an effective community policing department. Devoting resources to developing internal policies that are clear and concise are beneficial in guiding officer behavior. Policies that are ineffective could be revised and resources could be devoted to areas in need of attention. Internally reviewing policies should focus on improving practices in a reflective, non- adversarial manner.

Northern Nevada law enforcement agencies have implemented several Task Force recommendations. Agencies have policies on impartial policing policies in place, they review serious incidents internally, and involve employees in the development of policies and procedures. Yet, these agencies could go a step further in implementation.

Agencies should identify, update, and publicly publish mission-related policies (e.g. use of force) and procedures. Moreover, agencies should include community representatives in the process of drafting, evaluating, and reviewing policies and procedures, which should help to build trust. Agencies should also garner input from community representative on policies regarding the use of new technologies (i.e. body-worn cameras).

Lastly, given that there is no formal review process in place following critical or serious incidents, agencies should explore the feasibility of establishing a formal internal peer review of critical incidents.

### **Human Capital and Officer Wellness**

It is no secret that police work is stressful and takes a toll on the physical and mental wellbeing of law enforcement personnel. Traumatic events can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and other negative health outcomes. Stress is magnified by understaffed agencies, where officers are expected to do more work with fewer resources. Law enforcement agencies should continually replenish their staff to avoid understaffing, in addition to focusing on the physical and mental wellbeing of their personnel to mitigate negative health outcomes.

The Guinn Center's research indicates that northern Nevada law enforcement agencies are understaffed. For example, in 2016, the Reno Police Department had 312 sworn officers compared to the pre-recession number of 391 sworn officers, representing a 17.9 percent decrease. Reno has fewer officers per 10,000 residents; in 2010 Reno had 14.5 officers per 10,000 residents compared to the 2010 national average of 18 officers per 10,000 residents. With fewer officers, agencies often do not have the resources to fully staff community officer positions, making it harder to perform community outreach efforts effectively.

Reno Police Chief Jason Soto stated that it is his goal to increase the number of officers per residents, but cites that it is difficult to a lack of revenue streams. Agencies should partner with community organizations, state legislators, and city and county elected officials to request additional funding. The primary goal should be to increase the number of officers per residents, specifically Community Action and Outreach Officers.

While some northern Nevada law enforcement agencies have health and wellness programs, there remains limited institutional support from within the three northern Nevada law enforcement agencies. There is a stigma attached to seeking mental health treatment. To address this, agencies should survey officers anonymously to determine their behavioral health needs and interests. Mental health providers and psychologists should be available to provide sworn and non-sworn officers with mental health services. This should be paired regular seminars hosted by mental health providers to openly discuss mental health topics.

A review of the best practices recommended by the Task Force suggests that Nevada's law enforcement agencies have made substantial progress in promoting community policing. Yet, there remains opportunities to further implement recommendations. It is our hope that these recommendations offered can assist northern Nevada law enforcement agencies in meeting the Task Force's best practices and fulfilling a community-oriented policing strategy.