

Refunctioning the Police in Longmont

BY ALBERT W. DZUR AND JOHN MCKNIGHT

Longmont, Colorado, is a city of just under 100,000 located 16 miles from Boulder and 37 miles from Denver. The population is 89 percent white, with 25 percent of Longmont's residents reporting Latino ethnic heritage.¹ Thirty-one years ago, on August 14th, 1980, community tensions erupted in what some now call a "Ferguson before Ferguson" moment. That Friday night, two junior police officers, John Davis and Glenn Herner, stopped a car of five raucous wedding partygoers after one had shouted "(expletive) you, pigs!" While the officers attempted to arrest one of the passengers, two others, Jeff Cordova and Juan Garcia, attempted to intervene. Herner shot and killed Garcia in the struggle, and when Cordova ran away, Herner fatally shot him as well, mistakenly thinking the fleeing victim had taken Davis's gun.²

The police shooting of two 21-year-olds galvanized the Longmont Latino community. The civic group El Comité formed in response and has been highly active in city politics, especially on public safety issues. El Comité organized a candlelight vigil for the shooting victims and, in consultation with the federal Justice Department, worked out a memorandum of understanding with the police department, which included use of force rules, review panels, and a hotline to report police harassment. The shooting is still deeply felt in the Latino community and the measures taken to respond to it reverberate today in patterns of police-community relationships catalyzed and nurtured by key people in the community and in city government.

One important actor is Mike Butler, the public safety chief from 1993 to 2020. Butler's community-centric values, flat organizational philosophy, and innovative policies offer instructive lessons for public administrators and public safety officials seeking to heal divisions and form better community relationships.

The Beginning of the “Butler era”

Already a resident of Longmont, Butler was hired by the city manager after 15 years of moving up the ranks of the police department in nearby Boulder. He entered a fortress-like department with a legacy of distrust in predominantly Latino neighborhoods, few community partnerships, and a transactional culture in which officers delivered impersonal public safety services to citizen taxpayers. Being a part of both the department and the community, Butler had higher expectations for his officers and his neighbors.

An important early step was simple and direct: nearly every Sunday Butler walked the neighborhoods with Dan Benavidez, a long-time resident and co-founder of El Comité. “Dan and I began walking neighborhoods on Sunday mornings,” Butler reported in a series of recent interviews with the authors. “We walked close to 200 neighborhoods over five years, met close to 4,000 people. The whole idea was to encourage people to feel and believe they belong, and we really focused on the Latino neighborhoods. Dan and I spent a tremendous amount of time in those neighborhoods. At the end of every conversation, we would make an invitation for people to become involved: we said, ‘we need you.’ And 80 percent would not only say ‘yes,’ they would say ‘yes, yes!’ and ‘I never knew anybody even cared if I helped or not.’ We would ask people what they wanted to do and what they wanted to see done in their neighborhood. We’d say, ‘we have issues in our community like mental health, issues like addiction, issues like homelessness; would you be willing to help out in some form or fashion?’”

Butler’s walks personalized the department and opened up communication with a part of the Longmont community estranged from the police. They also helped him convey a key message: you have a voice and you have abilities that this city needs to handle public safety concerns. Those taking him up on the invitation were welcomed into the department. The fortress dropped its drawbridge as citizens took part in staff meetings, hiring and promotion reviews, investigations, and victim support tasks. A full-time staff member was hired to help coordinate citizen participation. “We opened up our entire organization to people in the community. There are people in the community walking around our building all the time. You go into most police facilities, and it’s secure plexiglass and brick walls. The moment you walk through the

front door of our building, you see that it is designed to invite people in.”

Openness to the community demanded big changes to department routines and personnel. Butler faced significant opposition from superiors in city government who doubted that flat organizational structure could work with policing, a police union that threatened no-confidence votes, and officers who complained about being turned into social workers. There were long months when the new chief and his family were woken up by police cruisers blaring protest sirens as they rolled by his house in the middle of the night. Outside the fortress, entrenched citizens-as-the-customer attitudes presented additional bumps in the road.

Simple Tools for Complex Problems I: Internal Department Policy Changes



A flat, community-oriented organization needs people who want to take responsibility, do not need to be told what to do, and can talk and work with those outside the force. Some of the veteran officers flourished in Butler’s new system, but others did not. New officers were hired with an eye on non-traditional qualities to better support community-centered work. The department looked for mature, service-oriented people with life experience, strong communication skills, the ability to care for others and form relationships, and, importantly, with no record of violence. New hires were typically older than previous recruits and had often worked in other fields, for example, teaching. “We changed our whole hiring profile,” says Butler, “to hire people who are predisposed to wanting to be in relationships rather than being lone cowboys and cowgirls. We want people who thrive in healthy relationships.” It

was not easy to find people with such versatility—to be competent at responding to an active shooter call, for example, as well as good at relationship-building—but it was possible. On the job training and peer mentoring helped too.

In routine encounters with people struggling with substance use, for example, Butler expected officers to form connections, to say, “We’re not here to arrest you. We’re here to figure out how we can help you take another path. Let’s all sit down and talk about what that might look like for you.” Such officers “enter into a relationship where they can build trust with that person so that person begins to believe that there’s someone who cares, someone who says that they have value.” “When they’re in neighborhoods, they’re not out there looking for suspects. They’re there to say, ‘listen we’re here to try to figure out how to make your neighborhood, how to make our community healthier.’”

Butler also expected officers to be able to function outside of traditional command and control police norms. Autonomy inside the department encouraged personal responsibility and problem-solving creativity outside in the community. “I wanted our officers to respond to our community the way I responded to them,” notes Butler. “And if they thought they were partners with management and me, that their voice counted, their thoughts mattered, and they were invited to every single meeting and they were part of everything they wanted to be a part of, then they would replicate that model in the community.” To further relationships, Longmont officers are expected to stay in their assigned neighborhoods for at least a year.

To reinforce these new norms, Butler created a master police officer position (MPO) at the highest end of the department pay scale. Officers are promoted to this coveted MPO status for renewable one-year terms if they can show they made an impact on the neighborhoods in which they worked. Candidates have to present evidence during a review process that involves a panel of Longmont residents. In Longmont, the most community-oriented role in the department is not on the margins of the organization and is no mere public relations job. MPOs are the best compensated, hold the highest status, and face significant expectations for mentoring other officers. As Butler notes, “in order to be the highest paid police officer in the city of Longmont you had to be able to prove to a group of your peers and other citizens that the

work you did in your neighborhood improved the quality of life. And you had to bring in people from the neighborhood to say here's what's happened differently." Competition is strong within the ranks to obtain this position.

In promoting and evaluating master police officers, Butler created a new metric for assessing department success: "That you made a qualitative difference in the neighborhood that you're assigned to. We looked at fewer calls for service, we looked at less crime, less disorders, we looked at people in the community willing to step up and take more of an active role in doing things. Our major metric for effectiveness was: we're no longer needed."

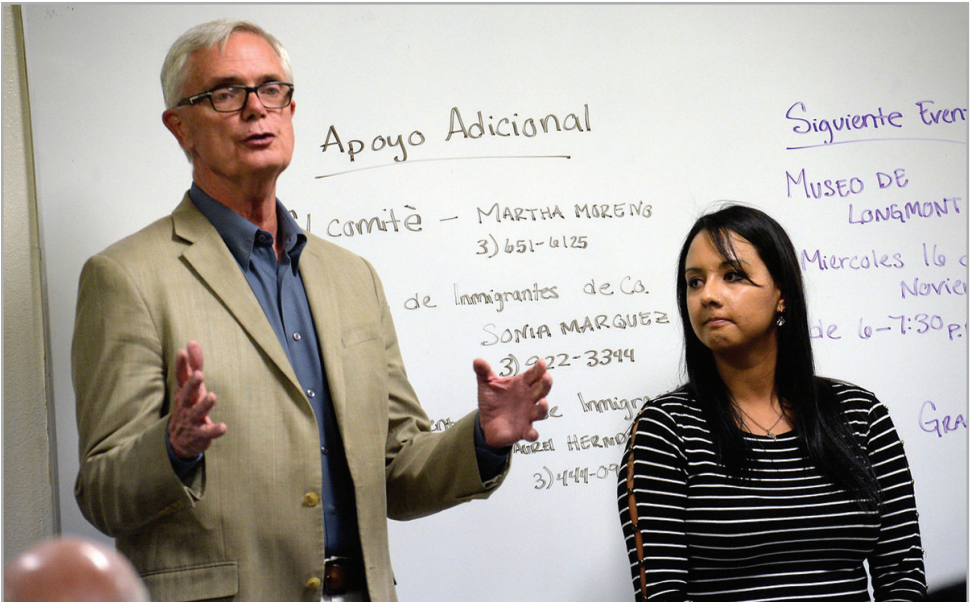
Longmont's new metric of success placed measurable improved relations with the community at the center, but these relations were not based on one-way service delivery outcomes. A fundamental part of the assessment was whether there was a decreased need for policing and increased citizen capacity to handle the everyday conflicts of community life. Butler's mantra, the government that governs best coordinates most, is a radical shift from government promising to deliver services to needy citizens. If they need me less, Butler reasons, they can do more. "What if the police began to see themselves as surfacing and activating social capital? And carved out of their days is time to do just that? What if people begin to see them as not just here to talk to you about a crime, but because they really care about their community and they want me to help?"

Rigorously evaluating how well the department is working with residents became part of the Longmont model. The department fielded biennial community surveys that asked people about recent contact with the police, what it concerned and how it went; these also asked what issues were emerging in their neighborhoods and what respondents might be able to do to help. A full-time research and development person was hired to sift through the findings to see what was working, document the department's track record, identify actionable tasks, and examine best practices from departments all over the world. Essential to planning, these data and analyses would also be useful for persuading recalcitrant officials and citizens to continue innovations rather than return to the status quo.

Simple Tools for Complex Problems II: External Strategies and Initiatives for Working with Community

An example of how Longmont police work with the community on public safety comes from one of the highest call neighborhoods. Early in Butler's tenure, residents of Stonehedge, a low-income housing complex, called the department over a hundred times a month. Because of the drug and gang activity in the neighborhood, residents were fearful of going outside and the police would not respond without two officers present.

Butler tried a different approach: "We went in and partnered with them and began to work with them in a way that said, 'you have the capacity to do this, and you have the capacity, without us, to move forward. We encouraged people to believe that by working with ownership and their neighbors they could make a difference, that they did belong.'" Master police officers came to Stonehedge and helped management and residents convene meetings to talk about concerns and offer solutions. The meetings would discuss what the police could do to help but also sought to uncover ways the residents could step in.



Over time, residents got to know each other better and started convening meetings on their own. Calls to the police department dropped to around five a month. As Butler notes, the transactional relationship changed:

“Until then, the police were telling people, ‘If you need us call us for anything.’ Well, that sets the terms of the relationship you’re going to have. Now the message is, ‘we would prefer that you handle this on your own, and we could show you how.’” This is not the absence of policing, it is a different kind of policing that requires listening skills, experience in mediation and meeting facilitation, and long hours of talking. MPOs who learn these social arts became mentors to their junior colleagues, passing on practical tips and lessons learned the hard way.

Shifting expectations for the community took time and did face obstacles throughout Longmont. “What are we paying you for if not to respond to our calls for police assistance?” was a common complaint. Breaking through attitudes of dependency and entitlement required a consistent message about the limits of policing without community action and the benefits of greater self-determination. Butler was transparent about the department’s budget, clearly communicating what police capacity was for solving certain problems, and what else needed to be done by other actors to handle major issues.

Domestic violence was one such major issue in Longmont. In the 1990’s, after five domestic violence fatalities in a brief period, Butler approached the heads of a social service agency and a safe shelter organization to sit down and work out how to coordinate resources. They launched a citywide survey of all residents to gauge awareness of domestic violence and solicit suggestions about what to do. The survey reported that most people did not think domestic violence was a police issue and that most people did not know what to do and whom to call if they became aware that a family member or friend or colleague was a victim.

The three wrote a successful grant application and formed the Longmont Ending Domestic Violence Initiative (LEVI). This nonprofit would take a community-wide approach to the problem, which the police department would be part of but would not orchestrate. The department’s research and development unit discovered that victims did not call police until they’d been battered eight times. So, the domestic violence team brainstormed ways of getting neighbors, fellow employees, high schools, and church congregations, to become more engaged. Rather than look the other way until a violent relationship became potentially fatal, the team’s public message was to get in touch

sooner rather than later. As Butler notes, “we shifted the nature of the conversation from it being a police issue and a criminal justice system issue into a community issue. And next thing you know that the whole culture changed around whose problem this was.” Domestic violence calls to the police are higher in Longmont now, making up 40 percent of such calls in Boulder County, but fatalities are at a historic low. Residents are now more aware that domestic violence is a problem and that there is someone they can call to help.

Refunctioning

These changes in Longmont policing did not happen all at once, but proceeded with two steps backward for every three steps forward. A significant factor in getting the department over bumps in the road was a motivating vision about what a successful government and a healthy community look like. Historically, in positioning itself as the dominant public safety service provider, the department had set itself up for failure on every public safety issue that required social capital, community vigilance, and citizen action to address. Even as it added armor to its fortress to strengthen its crime fighting capacity, it drained the community’s civic capacity. By contrast, while Butler’s bold vision saw police as a part of public safety, it insisted that to accomplish their job they must do far more than policing.

We characterize Butler’s reforms as “refunctioning.” Skilled and trained professionals start to work with citizens on tasks that conventionally would be handled without them; eventually, many of those tasks are done by citizens on their own. Nuisance reports from Stonehedge? A police officer might come to the scene, of course, but she would first see if a meeting could be convened among affected residents to talk through the problem and brainstorm solutions. A task that is typically taken up by a professional is “refunctioned” back to people in the community; over time, this routine becomes an expectation.

Refunctioning is not de-institutionalization. The police have not gone away and refused the call from Stonehedge; rather, they are doing different things when they respond. In order to do those different things—facilitating meetings, defusing stressful conversations, seeking out volunteers, for example—these officers need to have been hired and trained and mentored by a citizen-centric department keen to reproduce and reward these norms.

Everywhere one looks in Longmont, one sees load-bearing roles for residents carved into the traditional work of criminal justice, roles that are supported and often initiated by the police department. From citizen involvement in department hiring, to the civilian volunteer patrol that responds to events like parades and large accidents, to citizen victim aid supporters, there is a constant flow of community members taking on the shared work of public safety and criminal justice.

Initiatives like LEVI, in which the department is only one key partner and in which community members have operational roles, have multiplied. In 1996, Butler teamed up with Beverly Title to establish Longmont Community Justice Partnership, a program using restorative justice practices like conferencing to respond to certain juvenile and adult offenses. Planning the program took 18 months of dialogues and involved some 1000 participants. “It took us a long time,” Butler recalls, “because we had to get through all the conversations. You have a newspaper editor and a police officer from the midnight watch in the same room trying to figure out how to create a strategy for the future. Those are conversations that had never occurred before and we wanted to make sure that they had time to occur.” Community members are central to the community justice partnership’s mission, playing roles in restorative conferencing, and keeping the organization running. The police department plays a critical role too; it has diverted thousands of cases away from conventional prosecution and into the partnership’s restorative justice process.

Other alternatives to conventional criminal justice have emerged in Longmont as well, focusing on mental health and addiction, but always involving programs rooted in the community. “We wanted to get to a point,” says Butler, “where we didn’t have to arrest any kids. We would send them to these programs unless it was an ultra-serious crime. That was part of shifting the internal culture. Our model was we want to put ourselves out of business. To the level that we can, we can assist someone with their self-sufficiency and to sustain that self-sufficiency in small and large ways, so that we can just back out, and they can take over. It just became part of our culture, part of our philosophy, part of how we did business in the community, and they got to know that.”

Lessons from Longmont

No doubt there are assets found in abundance in Longmont, from

organizational talent and vision, to relatively high median family income, to natural beauty that attracts new residents and roots others to the place. Moreover, it is located in a “blue” county perhaps more amenable to progressive reforms than other, more rural and conservative areas. Nevertheless, we think Longmont offers at least eight lessons that can be taken up anywhere.

First, refunctioning takes vision. There is a bigger picture about government, community, and citizen into which the smaller pieces—the MPOs, the volunteer coordinator, the domestic violence NGO, the restorative justice program—all fit. Refusing to be located along traditional left-right ideological polarities, this picture stresses the ways that government is most effective when communities are most capable.

Second, refunctioning can’t be forced in any top-down way. The significant transformations it requires emerge from creating conditions in which department staff and citizens alike come to willingly choose new patterns of public safety practices. It fosters a “we did this” attitude inside and outside the department.

Third, refunctioning is about opening up those closed structures and practices that prevent the active involvement of people outside the fortress. It may mean physical changes in the built environment to reorient those inside and welcome those from outside. It certainly means offering roles to citizens on hiring and promotion committees and other impactful bodies.

Fourth, a commitment to refunctioning is a commitment to different modes and metrics of evaluation. How well individual officers and the department as a whole have increased community capacity becomes central to assessing results.

Fifth, refunctioning does not mean converting an issue from a policing problem to a mental health or a social services problem to be dealt with by another public agency. Refunctioning means surfacing, activating, and coordinating the social capital outside public agencies.

Sixth, refunctioning requires daily, personal relationship-building. Walk the neighborhoods, invite people into your world and enter theirs too, go to every community meeting to which you are invited and maybe

some where you're not, keep talking to people even when they're angry and you are too. There is no way for others to trust the changes they are asked to be part of without trusting the people involved. That trust is earned every day.

Seventh, refunctioning is not free but it needn't break the public budget. MPOs are paid more, but their high level of effectiveness has meant long term department savings because fewer officers are needed. Volunteer coordinators and community survey researchers need to be paid, but they bring in priceless human resources and actionable data analysis.

Eighth, refunctioning efforts will differ across the country whenever a police department experiments with opening up to their communities. We can imagine the vision emerging from community groups, from organized rank and file officers, and from elected officials. It does not depend on one especially motivated and talented torch bearer. If a town is lucky enough to find one, however, we think Longmont's experience suggests making the hire.

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