

New Orleans Program Teaches Officers to Police One Another

By Campbell Robertson
Aug. 28, 2016

NEW ORLEANS — This city's Police Department is not huge, and its past is particularly rough, so in a room of a dozen or so officers, most are going to know the bad cases all too well.

Many, for instance, knew the former officer who was fired this summer for hitting a man in handcuffs — and the two officers who were fired for watching him do it and lying about it. A few knew the officers convicted of shooting six unarmed people on the Danziger Bridge after Hurricane Katrina. A sergeant who had been charged with physically confronting a reporter in the weeks after Katrina, a charge that was ultimately dropped, was there in the room.

"If somebody had said, 'Hey, you've been out here for a while, why don't you rest?'" Sgt. Stuart Smith said of his attitude before the confrontation and the miserable experience — media attention, courtrooms, a jeopardized career — that followed, "things might have been different."

Sergeant Smith had just made the case for why these officers were spending most of a day in a classroom at the city's police academy. In an age when policing is under intense scrutiny, new training programs for officers are showing up across the country. Organizers say this one, which everyone on the 1,172-member police force here is expected to take, stands out in two ways.

The first is its goal: teaching officers how to be psychologically prepared to intervene when they see fellow officers on the verge of unethical behavior, no matter the circumstances. This will be taught in daylong courses and as a part of every course from de-escalation skills to report writing, in an attempt at instilling the approach that goes beyond what any police department has tried, said James S. Aronie, who was judicially appointed to oversee the department's adherence to a federal consent decree.

The second is the program's origins. While the curriculum was developed by New Orleans officers and outside experts, its core principles are rooted in the work of Ervin Staub, a retired psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who knows as well as anyone the perils of passivity and the virtues of intervention.

As a child in Budapest during World War II, Professor Staub and his family were hidden by a brave cleaning woman and later by Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Nazis. Professor Staub devoted his career to the study of good and evil, examining how genocides and other cases of group violence happen — in Nazi Germany, Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and elsewhere — and why certain people choose to help.

"Violence, and also helping, tend to evolve progressively," he said in a recent interview, explaining how groups grow more violent when observers remain passive. "Some bystanders may act, but usually only after violence has become extreme," he continued. "One of the things that I've been thinking about for some time is how we can move this forward so that people don't remain passive and tragic things happen."

Professor Staub, 78, has run workshops in Rwanda, worked on Dutch-Muslim relations in Amsterdam and testified at a military tribunal about the abuses at Abu Ghraib. After the beating of Rodney King in 1991 by Los Angeles police officers, Professor Staub was invited by California law enforcement officials to propose training strategies to encourage the police to practice what he calls "bystanderism" — intervening to prevent a bad thing from happening despite the impulse to look away.

His theories intrigued Mary Howell, a civil rights lawyer here who contacted Professor Staub about a police brutality lawsuit in New Orleans. She would later recommend his books to New Orleans officers, community activists and, in recent years, Justice Department investigators involved in a federal investigation into the Police Department, brought about by post-Katrina police abuses.



As detailed in a blistering 2011 report, that inquiry found that “officers of every rank” routinely violated the constitutional rights of residents, while those who tried to intervene could expect retribution. “They don’t all do bad things,” Stephen Parker, who was part of a Justice Department team and is now a private consultant, recalled hearing from a citizen. “But the other ones let the bad guys do bad things.”

The concept of peer intervention earned passing mentions in the consent decree that federal officials negotiated with the city in the spring of last year, with the input of Professor Staub and several other outside experts, a group of New Orleans police officers began to develop a formal intervention program. It was not a new concept, said Michael S. Harrison, the police superintendent. “We hadn’t talked about the science behind it and how to do it and recognize it, and understand its value of saving careers,” he said.

Training began in January among the top ranks; so far, roughly one-third of the force has taken the classes.

The class at the training academy was attended by rookies and veterans, some in uniforms, some in T-shirts. They looked at a video about the Kitty Genovese case and famous psychological experiments about morality and authority. They talked about the tactics of intervening: approaching, say, a partner who is getting heated with a suspect and telling him or her, in coded language, that they should handle it from here.

Stepping in was not described in purely ethical terms nor, instructors emphasized, as some variation of “ratting,” which has been the main source of skepticism about the program within the force. On the contrary, they said, in the hyper-transparent era of body cameras and smartphones, this was a way to protect fellow officers from disciplinary action, criminal charges or worse. One study showed that 141 officers had died while on duty in 2008; that same year, an equal number had committed suicide, and more than 100 times as many had lost their jobs because of misconduct.

“Would you stop your partner from getting shot if you could?” Officer Jacob Lundy, an instructor, asked. “Why wouldn’t you stop your partner from being fired if you could?”

Several in the class suggested this might not be so easy in practice. How does a rookie tell an unfamiliar superior officer, at a crime scene, that he or she is crossing a line? How can an officer take an unscheduled rest, even if badly needed, when the department is facing a serious shortage of manpower?

Michael Glasser, the president of the Police Association of New Orleans, the local union, further questioned whether these judgment calls could really come into play with so much of policing subject to strict rules since the consent decree.

“We have a very narrow window to work in,” he said. “The rules are to the nth degree now, with everything scripted out as to what you will do and how you will do it.”

Mr. Aronie said his ambitions for the program are high, and recognized that its roots, in the study of human behavior amid even a widespread scale, are not modest. But given the profusion of well-meaning but ineffectual police training programs, he said, here is for what is feasible.

“Ultimately, what we realized is that you can’t solve the world’s problems right away,” he said. “Let’s solve what we can solve.”