

Transforming the Culture of Policing from Warriors to Guardians in Washington State

“In a republic that honors the core ideals of democracy the greatest amount of power is given to those called guardians. Only those with the most impeccable character are chosen to bear the responsibility of protecting the democracy.” –Plato

The images emerging from Ferguson of peace officers, clad in military style uniforms utilizing equipment designed for modern warfare, serve as an impetus for public safety leaders *and* political leaders to pause and assess the state of American police culture. It is easy to rush to judgment about the equipment - armored personnel carriers and high powered rifles – and condemn its use by civilian police. In fact, this equipment can be essential for modern police forces to *protect* themselves *and* their communities from very real threats of the 21st Century. The fundamental issue is not the equipment - it's the philosophy, policies, and protocols directing its use. A national discussion about modern police culture needs to be followed with action.

At the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, where training is provided to 10,000 police officers and deputies from across the state, that discussion has already taken place. Action has come in the form of a strategic cultural transformation in the Basic Law Enforcement Academy where more than 500 new recruits are trained each year, setting the stage for the next generation of policing. This change in culture reflects current research about the safest and most effective ways to gain compliance to laws and build the trust and support necessary to effectively keep communities safe.

Until 2012, basic training was conducted under a paramilitary “boot camp” model, beginning with a “tune-up” where recruits were screamed at and berated and the fear of failure was the motivational strategy. Throughout the Academy they were required to brace (salute) and remain silent when encountering academy staff. Recruits were expected to obediently submit to the power of the training officers without question. Despite the offering of behavioral and communications instruction in the classroom, the majority of the five-month training regime emphasized tactical skills training accompanied by a steady stream of fear-provoking stories about officers killed in the line of duty. Few classes effectively integrated communication skills

with physical tactics. Physical control was emphasized over de-escalation. Conquering was emphasized over serving. The warrior mentality was ever-present in the culture.

In 2012 we began asking the question, “Why are we training police officers like soldiers?” Although police officers wear uniforms and carry weapons, the similarity ends there. The missions and rules of engagement are completely different. The soldier’s mission is that of a warrior: to conquer. The rules of engagement are decided before the battle. The police officer’s mission is that of a guardian: to protect. The rules of engagement evolve as the incident unfolds. Soldiers must follow orders. Police officers must make independent decisions. Soldiers come into communities as an outside, occupying force. Guardians are members of the community, protecting from within.

We decided it was time for a change and thus began the implementation of a new philosophy - moving from the mindset of warriors to guardians. The term “guardians” was adopted from the writings of Plato. The intent was to move the police culture back to the core mission of protecting the democracy – and instilling in recruits the pride of serving a noble purpose. Many protocols have been changed. Rather than imitating a stereotypical drill sergeant, training officers are expected to act as role models demonstrating the appropriate use of power by using mutual respect to motivate compliance. The rule for recruits to brace has been replaced with a requirement to stop and initiate a conversation when passing academy on campus – a skill needing attention with the millennial generation - and absolutely critical for officers on the street. The humiliation of “tune-up” day has been replaced with the Seahawks Coach Pete Carroll’s leadership style of intense competition, camaraderie and encouragement. The skills training for firearms and defensive tactics have become more rigorous to ensure confidence, but also infused with communication strategies and de-escalation techniques.

In addition to changing protocols and updating the curriculum to include more information about neuroscience research, and behavioral science, the symbols and rituals throughout the training environment have been changed to reflect the honor and nobility of the profession. The display case featuring the *tools* of policing has been replaced with a wall-sized mural of the opening words of the United States Constitution – a reminder of the core *mission* of policing. Before their badges are pinned recruits are given a personal pocket size booklet containing the Constitution. Recruits are then asked to honor the memory of military veterans who have given

their lives to defend our constitution and remember that if a police officer violates a citizen's civil rights that action dishonors the sacrifice of those military heroes.

Although this change in the training culture has been embraced by many, there are many others who resist the transition from the warrior to the guardian mindset. The resistance is understandable. It is not a simple distinction because the role of a police officer is not one-dimensional. There are times when the guardian officer must fight fierce battles, as a warrior, without hesitation or apology. Our guardians *must* also possess the skills of a warrior. The challenge of training new police recruits is to equip them with the judgment and confidence to properly balance both roles...rather than simply follow orders. We need police officers with the skills and tenacity of a warrior, but the mindset of a guardian.

(Sue Rahr retired as the Sheriff of King County (Seattle) after 33 years in law enforcement. She is the current Director of the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission.)