September 23, 2014

Overview:
On August 9, 2014, a Ferguson, Missouri police officer shot and killed 18-year-old Michael Brown during a confrontation. By all accounts, Brown was unarmed. His body lay on the ground for more than four hours before being transported to the medical examiner’s office.

The shooting and subsequent actions of police ignited a cycle of civil disobedience and rioting that lasted for several days. The complexity and visual nature of the situation captured the attention of the nation and left communities throughout the United States questioning the tactics and effectiveness of the police.

Seeking to learn from these events, Maryland’s police executives participated in a roundtable discussion on September 23, 2014 that focused on understanding the totality of the circumstances surrounding the incident. The discussion was designed to inspire thought and reflection on the impact of this important event within the field of public safety.

Advanced Leadership Consortium:
The roundtable discussion was facilitated by the Advanced Leadership Consortium (ALC).

ALC is a dedicated team of law enforcement and criminal justice experts committed to broadening the strategic growth in the complex field of public safety. Founded in 2012, ALC specializes in the development and assessment of strategic programs that reduce crime and enhance relationships between the community and law enforcement agencies.

Significant Issues:
The events in Ferguson and the response from the police departments involved raised a number of issues that were discussed in-depth among Maryland’s police executives, including:

- Trust and communication between the police and community
- The racial demographics of Ferguson police in relationship to the Ferguson community
- How and when police should release information
- The importance of media relations.
- The appropriate police response to protests and civil disobedience
- Building and maintaining community trust
- The efforts Maryland’s police executives can take/are taking to prevent situations like the events in Ferguson

The Maryland police executives explored the context of these issues within three discussion components: The Breakdown of Trust and Communication, the Militarization of Police Departments and Local Prevention Efforts.

A Breakdown of Trust and Communications:
The Maryland police executives strongly believed that the events that transpired in Ferguson were the tragic results of a fundamental breakdown of trust and communication between the police department and the community. This breakdown had manifested itself over numerous years and was rooted in the style of policing and tactics repeatedly demonstrated by the police department.
Fred Bealefeld (Retired Police Commissioner, Baltimore Police Department, and ALC Associate Expert) spoke about his experience participating in a town hall meeting as part of a Public Broadcasting Special, “America after Ferguson”. He reflected on the stories Ferguson residents told about police-community relations.

For example, police were known to use a zero tolerance style of policing where stops, arrests and citations were heavily emphasized. Bealefeld recounted that most people who spoke at the town hall meeting expressed a lack of trust in the police and believed that the issues between police and the community were there as a continual undercurrent.

“White people were focused on race, while black people were more focused on issues of police legitimacy. One of the biggest complaints was that the members of the community don’t know the police and the police don’t know them. The residents feel harassed all the time, and have no trust in the police. There is real fear police will over-react and that something minor will get people shot.”

Commissioner Bealefeld said residents at the town hall meeting emotionally talked about Michael Brown’s body lying on the ground for four hours as both inhumane and as an indication that the police had little respect for the community. “The river of blood still in the street was, for them, a sign that no one cared.”

“Success in the crime fight can give a police department a false justification that oppressive policing works.” - John Skinner (ALC Facilitator)

One significant issue raised about Ferguson, Missouri and the Ferguson Police Department was whether the demographics of a police department affected the legitimacy of the police within the community.

At the time of the shooting, approximately two-thirds of the town’s 21,000 residents were African American, whereas Ferguson Police Department had 53 officers. All but three were white. The racial demographics of the town had shifted significantly over the past 40 years but this change was not reflected in the configuration of the police department.

The Maryland police executives discussed the importance of having departments reflect the communities they serve. There was agreement that diversity in police departments should be a priority and ideally should attempt to reflect their communities.

While most executives in Maryland are trying to recruit more diverse personnel, they argued that the relationships police develop with the people in their communities are more important. Having strong police-community relationships founded on trust and communication can overcome issues of race.
Some of the thoughts on this important issue included:

**Chief Kevin Sewell (Pocomoke City Police Department):** “Departments should reflect the communities they serve, but even more important is that police officers have to get out and meet members of the community, get to know the people and gain their trust. What officers do on a daily basis is more important than the department’s demographics.”

**Colonel Marcus Brown (Maryland State Police):** “We should attempt to reflect the communities we serve, but building relationships through communication in communities is critical. People can get to know our officers, and the officers get to know the people. Communication is the foundation.”

**Mark Spencer, Attorney (Prince George’s County Sheriff’s Department):** How officers talk to people is an important component in building trust and respect. “By far, the largest percentage of complaints against officers are discourtesy complaints. You reveal what you feel about people through language and behavior. The art of communicating with people should be a training focus for all of us.”

**Sheriff Melvin High (Prince George’s County Sheriff’s Office):** “Perception is the critical issue. Trust and communication is so important. So how do we get that? Members of the community who know their officers is key. You also have to have trusted people in the community with whom you can share information.”

The police executives expressed that building trust in the community is a long-term strategy that evolves over time. Police agencies need to be more effective in recruiting and hiring officers that are reflective of the communities they serve and embrace a philosophy of collaboration. Finding, developing and supporting these officers is a critical responsibility of police executives.

**What Departments Are Doing to Recruit a Diverse Workforce:**

- **Anne Arundel County Police Department** has developed a mentoring program that pairs applicants with a mentor from the department of the same race and gender.

- **Prince George’s County Sheriff’s Department** translated recruiting tools and information into Spanish and assigned Latino or Hispanic officers to the Recruiting Division.

- **Howard County Police Department** networks through current employees and area churches.

- **Several police departments, including Prince George’s County, Baltimore County and Ocean City** have programs that focus on building rapport with children, guiding them to make the right choices if they want a career in law enforcement.

**Chief John Fitzgerald (Chevy Chase Police Department):** “I need people who won’t go out and complicate situations with their words. If we choose recruits who can communicate and who are great people, that’s a lot of it right there. We tell them, ‘police like you’re going to see them again.’”

**Captain Darian Palmer (Howard County Police Department):** “The problem is, we bring these good people into the existing culture and this culture may not support them. We have to work on changing the philosophy of the whole organization, especially the existing personnel.”

**Grayling Williams, (PA Office of Attorney General):** “If departments can’t get a racially matched department to the community, they need to invest in cultural training and recruit people who grew up in the communities.”
The Maryland police executives also felt that how the Ferguson Police Department communicated both directly and indirectly in the immediate aftermath of the shooting reinforced the level of distrust. Leaving Michael Brown’s body on the scene for several hours, the decision not to release the name of the officer involved, and limited disclosure of relevant facts conveyed a message that the community’s perception of the incident was not important. This distrust quickly escalated into strong sentiments of frustration, anger, and resentment.

There was consensus among the police executives that the name of the officer should have been released sooner. This lack of responsiveness and transparency were factors that escalated and prolonged the violent confrontations in the days following the shooting.

As Deputy Chief Kevin Kristen (Ocean City Police Department) explained, “It is critical to get information out ahead of time. We need to ensure that situations do not come to a boiling point.”

Militarization of Police Departments:
The discussion and idea of the militarization of the police is not a new topic in U.S. history. Over the last 25 years the perception of the militarization of police has grown with the “war on drugs” and “war on terror.” Law enforcement’s role within these missions has not been clearly defined and by their nature seem inconsistent with a traditional community policing philosophy.

In 1981, Congress passed the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act (MCLEA) which opened lines of communication between the military and domestic law-enforcement and authorized the Department of Defense (DOD) to support domestic police departments with military equipment. MCEA was then expanded in 1997 when Congress enacted the 1033 Program which allowed the DOD to transfer military equipment directly to law-enforcement agencies. This equipment included armored vehicles, body armor, rifles, helicopters, boats and a multitude of specialized equipment that was intended to support the mission of domestic law enforcement.

As the events in Ferguson accelerated with organized protests, civil disobedience and rioting, a wide range of concerns were raised that the heavy use of military style equipment and tactics by the police was excessive and escalated the level of hostility.

The appearance of officers in SWAT gear, the military-style formations, and the use of tear gas and rubber bullets all contributed to the perception that the police were no longer community partners but rather an occupying military force. One of the most memorable and lasting visual images of Ferguson include an officer in a combat style uniform, perched atop an armored vehicle with a sniper rifle trained on demonstrators.

This image reinforces the context that the law enforcement response in Ferguson resembled a full military combat operation in enemy territory, and not a partnership between the police and community working together to ensure safety within a neighborhood.

The Maryland police executives discussed to what extent that this level of response contributed to the escalation within the cycle of disorder and further eroded community relations.

The police executives believed that this level of response appeared, at least initially, to be excessive and that the responding law enforcement agencies had an obligation to the community to pursue strategies that would de-escalate the conditions.
Commissioner Fred Bealefeld related comments he heard at the town hall meeting in St. Louis. “People said, ‘they do it because they can.’ We have a lot of equipment we can use. But should we?”

Sheriff High (Prince George’s County Sheriff Office), Chiefs Kevin Davis (Anne Arundel County Police Department) and Barbara Duncan (Salisbury Police Department) inquired about what, if any, efforts were made to work with local leadership in Ferguson and what other approaches were vetted prior to the use of the military equipment and deploying so many troops.

As Chief Michael Pristoop (Annapolis Police Department), put it: “There were other options, but once they took the step with the military tactics, there was no way to immediately dial back the response. It seems like the police had pre-conceived notions that the crowd was violent and went in with that mindset. It became a self-fulfilling prophesy.”

Colonel Marcus Brown (Maryland State Police): “There is a place for different pieces of equipment and how personnel should be deployed. The vast majority of civil disobedience in this country is sparked by law enforcement. If there are not restraints in these situations, the actions of law enforcement can further escalate the overall conditions.”

The police executives agreed that leadership is a critical component within crisis situations. There must be an expectation that executive leadership has considered all options and defined the accepted level of engagement with everyone responding to the incident. It did not appear that these expectations were clearly defined and communicated in Ferguson.

Chief Dave Morris (Riverdale Park): “There appeared to be a breakdown in the unity of the command. People on the front lines were taking conflicting direction from a variety of different supervisors, or they weren’t taking it at all. Either way, it was a breakdown of leadership.”

Alan Goldberg (Tacoma Park Police Department): “We have responsibility to make sure the level of force is appropriate to the situation.”

The Maryland police executives discussed the utility and need for military type of equipment within domestic law enforcement. There was consensus among the police executives that police departments do have a legitimate need for specialized military-style equipment but there should be clear expectation and understanding on their use.

Chief Gary Garner (Howard County Police Department) pointed to the shooting that occurred at The Mall in Columbia on January 25, 2014 as an incident where military equipment was necessary to ensure the safety of citizens and police. This was an incident that was widely publicized in media and law-enforcement circles as a model case study on police response.

Chief Garner advised that there were several armored vehicles on the incident scene from agencies around the State. They were there as a precaution in the event officers needed them for evacuations or if the situation escalated into an active shooter incident.

Other active shooter incidents were also discussed as context for why law enforcement operations may need the deployment of military-style equipment. Current best practices on police response to active shooter incidents recommend that first responders take immediate action to neutralize the threat. This is a dramatic shift from the traditional isolate and contain philosophy. These new practices require extensive training and often necessitate equipping officers with
protective military style armor and assault weapons.

The events on 9/11 and on-going terrorist warnings were discussed as reasons police departments need to have military style equipment at their disposal. Terrorist events throughout the world continually reinforce that law enforcement has a critical role in preventing and mitigating these threats. Without proper equipment, police departments will be left unprepared and unequipped to respond accordingly.

The Maryland police executives also discussed the importance of the uniform that police officers wear. They characterized the police officer’s uniform as an outward reflection of the department, and that this reflection should be based on an image of approachability and professionalism. The style of the police uniform can have a tremendous impact on community perception and impact an officer’s attitude, mindset, and perception of their mission. In recent years, many police departments in the United States have shifted from the more traditional police dress uniform to one that resembles a military style look. With this uniform shift, it is not uncommon to see police officers dressed in “BDU” style pants that are bloused and tucked into boots.

In Ferguson, the responding police agencies adopted a full military uniform equipped with helmets and green/gray “BDU” style pants and shirts.

As Lt. Col. Fred Damron (Mass Transit Administration Police) described it, “BDU stands for Battle Dress Uniform. And being ready for battle is not the image that we want our officers to convey.”

Chief John Fitzgerald (Chevy Chase Village Police Department) indicated that what an officer wears can change how the officer thinks and acts. “An officer that wears a more aggressive battle style uniform will start to act in that aggressive manner, which is not what we want in our officers. A person who dresses in a more professional manner will in turn act more professional.”

The Maryland police executives concluded that while there is a legitimate need for military-style equipment within law enforcement, there must to be controls and limitations on the use. The police executives were in agreement that the deployment of military equipment requires strong leadership and supervisory oversight with clear guidelines.

One suggestion was that police departments should incorporate the use of military style equipment into their use of force guidelines. These guidelines should emphasize the de-escalation of incidents and reserve military tactics and equipment for extreme conditions to prevent the loss of life.

Local Prevention Efforts:
In the final discussions, The Maryland police executives focused on the importance of understanding and learning from the tragic events of Ferguson.
Since the police involved shooting of Michael Brown in August, all of the police executives reported participating in community meetings or forums that focused on Ferguson specific issues. Although, the police executives described variations in both the sponsors and participants of these community meetings, the wide-spread regularity of them reaffirms that the challenges of police legitimacy and trust transcends many neighborhoods and communities.

The Maryland police executives strongly felt that these types of community forums were a positive step moving forward to help reinforce communication and strengthen community partnerships.

Several participants described efforts to build and institutionalize these community forums as an on-going effort to reinforce police, community communication.

Chief Dave Morris (Riverdale Park Police Department) explained the importance of educating the community about police procedure. “Communities need to have a clear expectation and understanding of law enforcement response during an incident. We have to do a better job teaching the community about police work.”

One program that the Riverdale Park Police Department has implemented is a series of community roll calls on police procedure. These community roll calls occur directly within neighborhoods and residents are encouraged to attend and ask questions. This allows police managers to positively interact and educate residents without any filter.

Many of the police executives also believe that the events in Ferguson provided them the context to reaffirm and strengthen their community policing efforts.

Chief Gary Gardner explained that their evaluation quickly discovered that their community policing satellite substations were not being used to their maximum potential.

Chief Gardner is also using the backdrop of Ferguson to reaffirm the relationship between the police department and the faith based community. “We have asked our faith leaders to start holding community forums to open the lines of communication. They have been tremendous partners and this has been very successful.”

Chief Michael Pristoop (Annapolis Police Department) described a successful initiative where the Annapolis Police Department was deploying teams of officers in high crime zones. Unlike more traditional enforcement strategies, Chief Pristoop encouraged these officers to be community builders. “I wanted these officers to see their role differently. We encouraged them to think about improving the community and being creative in finding resources that could be brought in to help.” These types of community policing efforts strengthen communication and develop long term trust.

Many of the police executives also recognized the significance of clearly defining the importance of community, police partnerships within their own agencies.

As Deputy Chief Kevin Kristein (Ocean City Police Department) explained it: “Sometimes, traditional law enforcement training creates a mentality of us versus them. It is the idea of the thin blue line that emphasizes the concept that police are alone out there. There needs be a strong internal message emphasizing that the police and community are partners.”
Colonel Marcus Brown (Maryland State Police) used Ferguson to reinforce the Department’s philosophy of community policing. Colonel Brown issued an internal memo to every trooper in the agency emphasizing the importance of the police and community working together. “I felt confident that the leadership understood the Department’s commitment to community policing, but I wanted to make sure everyone understood the message.”

Chief Mark Sroka (Gaithersburg Police Department) used a similar technique and addressed a memo to every officer re-emphasizing the Department’s core values of service, integrity and respect. “I reminded them that Ferguson can happen anywhere. We can prevent it by following our core values in everything that we do.”

Conclusion:
The police-involved shooting of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 and the cycle of unrest, civil disobedience, rioting and violence that swept through the small town of Ferguson, Missouri has opened a national discussion about the effectiveness of law enforcement.

Police executives from throughout the state of Maryland have committed themselves to understand and apply the lessons learned from the tragedy. Despite all the complexities within the dynamics of Ferguson, there is universal recognition from Maryland’s police leaders that the situation was perpetuated by a continual breakdown in the fundamental relationship between police and community.

Although the images of Ferguson are disheartening and illicit strong, emotional perspectives, they provide a unique opportunity for police executives and communities to begin conversations about legitimacy and trust. Through the coordination of the Maryland Chiefs of Police Association, police executives from throughout the state have embraced this responsibility and are working diligently to enhance lines of communication and strengthen community partnerships.

In her role as president of the Maryland Chiefs Association, Teresa Walter (Chief of Havre de Grace Police Department) summarized it: “As police leaders, we have an obligation to the communities throughout Maryland to ensure that the events in Ferguson never happen again.”

Roundtable Participating Agencies:

- Annapolis Police Department
- Anne Arundel County Police Department
- Baltimore County Police Department
- Baltimore Police Department
- Baltimore Environmental Police Department
- Berwyn Heights Police Department
- Calvert County Police Department
- Chevy Chase Police Department
- Coppin State University
- Easton Police Department
- Gaithersburg Police Department
- Greenbelt Police Department
- Havre de Grace Police Department
- Howard County Police Department
- Hyattsville Police Department
- Maryland Chiefs of Police Association
- Maryland National Capitol Police Department
- Maryland State Police
- Maryland Transportation Authority Police
- Maryland Transit Administration Police
- Maryland Institute of Art - Public Safety
- Mount Rainier Police Department
- Natural Resources Police Department
- Ocean City Police Department
- Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office
- Pocomoke Police Department
- Prince Georges County Police Department
- Riverdale Park Police Department
- Salisbury Police Department
- Takoma Park Police Department
- University Park Police Department

The Advanced Leadership Consortium completed this report for the Maryland Chiefs of Police Association.

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