The Colorado Health Foundation™



How Charleston Confronted Horror Through a Deeper Understanding of Inequity

How can you tackle inequity? Look at your immediate surroundings: Your neighborhood, your work, your city or your volunteer time. What is happening that prohibits people from reaching equity in their health, in their pay, in their treatment by our institutions?

It's fair to say this challenging, self-reflective approach is not the first quality many city residents expect to find in their local police chief. Thus, it's all the more effective and thought-provoking when retired Charleston, S.C. Police Chief Greg Mullen quietly described the painstaking steps he led his department through while changing a deep-seated culture and creating a more equitable city.

Mullen, speaking at the 2017 Colorado Health Symposium, told of balancing his obvious job – public safety – with what he had observed in some incidents as a clear issue in Charleston: "equal treatment under the law," as a Charleston newspaper columnist put it. Beneath the vibrant quality of life that many of Charleston's residents enjoy, for example, was a deep divide between various segments of the community regarding unequal enforcement of laws involving public drinking and other issues, Mullen said.

"I've tried to look at public safety as a system, and the social determinants of health are a part of that system," Mullen said, speaking with Colorado Health Foundation President and CEO Karen McNeil-Miller. Soon after becoming police chief in 2006, Mullen recalled walking the challenging neighborhoods of Charleston with other officers, and watching children run away, frightened at what their uniform authority represented.

“That was life-changing,” he said. “I committed then to changing the way the community thought of police.”

Soon thereafter, the Charleston department launched a summer camp where children can interact positively with volunteers, police officers, counselors and other community leaders. Mullen shared that the kids are far more enthusiastic to “Cop Camp,” as some campers refer to it, than merely seeing officers speak at their schools once a year.

Charleston’s police department also started a family violence unit that integrates mental and behavioral health specialists with law enforcement to intervene early with families that have experienced violence. Studies show that early interventions can prevent those touched by violence from cascading into further problems.



Retired Charleston, S.C. Police Chief Mullen and local clergy members fellowship together during a community prayer gathering.

Mullen spoke of his department’s’ efforts as not just inviting community groups to take a seat at his table, but rather law enforcement asking permission to take a seat at the community’s table. “Partnerships will get you through the door. Relationships will get you a seat at the table,” is one of his recurring mantras.

The importance of that culture change was tested when Charleston faced the crushing community crisis of the 2015 church murders. Dylann Roof, a white

supremacist, killed nine people during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. “The horror was unfathomable,” Mullen said, but the department’s previous community engagement and equity work gave them the space to start responding. The groundwork likely helped a community in shock avoid spiraling into recrimination and potential racially-based upheaval.

Development of the family violence unit meant there were mental health crisis workers and victim experts immediately on call to help. Rather than focusing exclusively on the investigative aspects of the case with involving victims and their families, the Charleston police connected them with the crisis workers. Those special units were “only there to help the families and share the sadness and pain,” Mullen said.

While police and prosecutors worked swiftly on the investigation and conviction of Roof, Mullen’s department redoubled efforts to improve racial relations in Charleston. Deep suspicions lingered after the high-profile and national incident. And targeted efforts were needed to strengthen the ongoing progress.

Routine traffic stops were a frequent source of friction, with police perceiving a safety violation and the community perceiving harassment, coupled with the financial burdens of expensive tickets and repair orders. Mullen’s department opened the police fleet maintenance shop to residents for free repairs of common infractions like broken tail lights, with local auto shops donating parts.

Being unable to see properly and fear of a traffic ticket, one elderly driver told police he hadn’t had his car out at night in six months for lack of working headlights. Now, with the much needed repair, he would be back out on the road. “That was a Mastercard moment,” Mullen said. “Priceless.”

Task forces, made up of community members and police, met to come up with trust-building strategies and delivered a white paper to the mayor with 86 ideas, Mullen added. In the meantime, the department helped start a series of

collaborative community meetings, not just forums where uniformed police stood at the front with arms crossed and heard lectures from angry citizens.

Instead, police and community members meet in small groups and participate in facilitated exchanges. Police also invite the community to better understand the cops' side of dangerous situations such as property searches, arrests in dark alleys, confrontations when weapons are present and other gray areas.

Mullen said his views have changed by learning about the concepts of "polarities," where not every situation is a problem to be solved, but rather an ongoing tension between two very different points of view.

"One of ours was the polarity of justice and mercy," said Mullen, who retired this summer after 35 years in public service. "How do you hold people accountable for crimes whiling also showing mercy? One strong polarity was enforcement and community support. The community wants us to enforce appropriate laws, but if I do that in a way that's like an occupying force, then I will lose that community support I need to make sure they are safe."

Near the end of his talk, McNeil-Miller asked Mullen how he would advise other communities to take on some of the same equity issues.

"So often, people are looking for the magic answer, they are waiting for the right grant to come in or the right budget, to fund all these things. What I would say to you is that's probably never going to happen," Mullen said. Charleston had sought funding for the family violence unit, but grants did not initially come through. So he and community partners moved people around under the existing budgets until they could fulfill the goal without new money.

He also urges community leaders - from government institutions to nonprofits - to "break out of the silos and start working cross-functionally."

“Unless we do that,” Mullen concluded, “Ten years from now it will be another generation in the same position. Failure is not an option. Go do the same role in your communities.”

Main image caption: *Camp Hope campers and volunteers enjoy their annual dinner cruise in Charleston Harbor*

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