

PERF: Making Headlines, & Headaches for Cops

You can't speak for law enforcement if you don't speak to law enforcement

By Jim Glennon (Calibre Press)

Chuck Wexler and PERF have been getting a lot of press lately as they are championed by many in the media as the foremost experts in law enforcement and, as such, they have been deemed by some as the ones who can reform our broken criminal justice system. The other day Wexler, along with Chief Scott Thomson, penned an op-ed in the New York Times titled: "Making Policing Safer for Everyone."

My problem: The piece offers suggestions, ideas and politically correct ideologies that will do anything but.

I travel the country and weekly interact with cops all over this nation from patrol officers and detectives, to the mid-level managers, commanders, chiefs and sheriffs. And I can tell you that morale is as low as I've ever seen it in my 36 years in the profession.

The reasons are many. From activists spewing vile falsehoods to the media characterizing the entire profession as a cooperative evil. But what discourages and dejects the police officers more than anything else is the lack of support from too many top leaders especially the ones given a national platform. They have become too PC, echoing skewed statistics and fabricated facts designed to push particular agendas.

PERF finds itself, unfortunately, in that category, as does Mr. Wexler.

Let's examine the op-ed.

Nuts & Bolts

Wexler pushes gun control pointing to the number of guns in the country as the true danger for police officers. Few police officers see gun-control—or rather the lack thereof—as a primary danger to cops working the street. But gun control is, despite this, an essential tenet of their ideology.

He then uses last month's shooting of Ashley Guindon, a Prince William County officer murdered on her first shift to condemn what he believes to be the mindset of officers around the country.

"Unfortunately, this sense of ever-present danger has shaped police training, tactics and culture in ways that can lead to responses that are neither proportional nor necessary in situations that don't involve guns. We need to rethink our tactics in such circumstances."

Mr. Wexler needs to rethink his perspective of what "we" think, who "we" are and how "we" train. He's way off the mark.

PERF and Wexler constantly perpetuate the myth that too many officers are too quick to react violently because we constantly overestimate danger and focus our training as though we are military warriors.

Not at all true!

One of his favorite examples is “the so-called 21-foot rule.” He writes: “In many police departments, officers are trained to be prepared to shoot if they are within 21 feet of someone with a knife.” This statement is beyond misleading as he insinuates that to be some sort of trained automatic response. It’s not and I believe never has been! **At least not for the last 30 years that I’ve been active.** But he constantly brings this falsehood up creating both a myth and a focal point to be used as fodder for the anti-law enforcement groups.

Throughout the op-ed Wexler’s verbiage is misleading at best and intentionally inflammatory at worst. For example, he mischaracterizes the 1989 Supreme Court decision, *Graham v. Connor*, which established how force used by a police officer is to be judged. He says in his article that “the court went on to caution that police officers are often forced to make split-second judgments—in circumstances that are tense, uncertain and rapidly evolving—about the amount of force that is necessary in a particular situation.”

The problem is that the Court’s opinion wasn’t a caution. It was an explanation and a recognition that people who are not experienced or trained in real life-and-death encounters can’t be expected to have the correct perspective when it comes to judging an officer’s use of force.

Then Wexler describes a case in which a “mentally ill person” is throwing rocks and is shot to death by police. He states: “The shooting is found to be legally justified (lawful), but to many who witness it or see it later on video, it does not appear to be proportional or necessary (awful).”

And that is a perfect example of the disingenuousness of the op-ed.

Yes, all deaths at the hands of others are “awful”! And no one knows that better than the officers who are forced to take a human life. But the insinuation that the “many who witness or see it later on video” should be considered when it is **your actual life on the line** is ludicrous!

Citizens who view a video absolutely won’t have the point of view or the perspective as experienced by the involved officer. They certainly don’t have the knowledge or the experience of trained police officers in most cases. And this isn’t my opinion: It’s that of the Supreme Court!

He then recounts a trip to Scotland (I’ve read the report) and talks—well, essentially—about apples and oranges.

He advocates the approach taken by police trainers in the United Kingdom, where communication is emphasized in training and force is deemphasized. With this I find myself somewhat in agreement! I wrote a book about communication skills. They are I believe the most important skills for officers to master, and something that is far too often overlooked in our training.

But he then points to a Camden County case where officers kept a distance and talked a man into dropping a knife. He says that “No shots were fired and no one was injured.”

The problem is that Wexler and his co-author (who happens to be the chief of, um, Camden) present this as the anomaly—not shooting a subject with a knife—when that is the norm! How many hundreds of times a day do you think police officers around this country face someone with an edged weapon? And guess what: The subject is almost never shot! In my own experience over 30 years I faced dozens who had knives, threatening to harm themselves or others, and I never shot one of them.

Here is the absolute truth factually and statistically: Police do everything they can to avoid hurting and, especially, killing a person. The problem is that those cases—literally 99% of all cases—don't make the news.

But Wexler wants to make the news, and he sadly does.

Conclusion

I'll end with this.

We make mistakes. Police officers are people, with individual personalities and individual strengths and weaknesses. But we are not a collective body of 800,000 with shared behaviors and robotic responses.

Chuck Wexler and other PERF associates need to stop perpetuating the myth that we over-train in the warrior arts and therefore overreact regularly with harm to the innocent. Statistically there is no truth to this.

What our profession does need to do is reevaluate who and how we hire, how we train, and, fundamentally, how we address stress as a primary cause of inappropriate behavior. This is something we don't do enough or in the right fashion.

Here's a suggestion. Next time the myriad of chiefs and ex-chiefs for PERF get together with the Ph.Ds to discuss what's happening on the streets, the problem with training, and how to improve, how about inviting, say, 1,000 street cops? Get the perspective of those who actually do, not just the theories of those who study and intellectualize what they read about the cops in the New York Times. Get opinions from those whose lives are actually on the line today and not from groups with who get financing from people with intolerant agendas.

We as a profession can, and must, improve. But as long as our own leaders continue to condemn and spread fables about who we are and what we do, the police who work the streets will shut down. The public will ultimately be who suffers. If you don't believe that look at the south and west sides of Chicago. The suffering is happening now.

Lt. Jim Glennon (ret.) is the owner and lead instructor for Calibre Press. He is a third-generation LEO, retired from the Lombard, Ill. PD after 29 years of service. Rising to the rank of lieutenant, he commanded both patrol and the Investigations Unit. In 1998, he was selected as the first Commander of Investigations for the newly formed DuPage County Major Crimes (Homicide) Task Force. He has a BA in Psychology, a Masters in Law Enforcement Justice Administration, is the author of the book Arresting Communication: Essential Interaction Skills for Law Enforcement.