

Demilitarizing the Cops: States Retool Police Training

deck

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Associated Press

BURIEN, Wash. (AP) — When prosecutor Dan Satterberg used to visit Washington state’s police academy, the seas would snap to attention, backs to the walls, and allow him to pass.

Now, they greet him and start a conversation.

“It takes a lot longer to walk down the halls,” said Satterberg, the elected prosecutor in Seattle’s King County.

The friendlier attitude reflects a campaign underway here and elsewhere around the U.S. to “demilitarize” the police and produce officers who think of themselves as guardians of their communities, not members of an occupying force.

Calls for demilitarizing law enforcement began a few years ago but gained urgency after the violent protests over the shooting of unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Fergu-

son, Missouri, last summer.

The philosophy was endorsed this week by President Barack Obama’s 21st Century Policing task force. As part of that change in thinking, Obama curtailed the government’s practice of supplying armored vehicles, heavy weapons and other military-style equipment to police departments.

But it isn’t just about the gear.

While some critics say that good officers already consider themselves protectors and that police need the best equipment to defend themselves and the public, many law enforcement leaders see a need for a broader change in police training and culture.

That includes getting cops to use their wits rather than their weapons whenever possible, as well as instilling a strong moral compass. Supporters say the approach could reduce cynicism, corruption and maybe even suicides among officers.

“We are at this moment where we have to re-engineer how we recruit, how

we train and how we supervise,” said Chuck Wexler, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Police Executive Research Forum.

“De-escalation, crisis intervention, better communication skills — all of these things are what the 21st century police officer needs to have in any situation, whether it’s talking to a citizen you may have stopped or trying to defuse a situation where a mentally ill person has picked up a rock or a weapon.”

For the past few years, the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, which trains the state’s local police and sheriff’s deputies, has emphasized such skills.

The state academy relies heavily on a curriculum called “Blue Courage,” developed by a former Aurora, Illinois, police commander with support from the U.S. Justice Department. It was first used in 2013 at Arizona’s largest police academy, after local chiefs listened to a presentation.



In this photo taken May 6, 2015, a pair of recruits wrestle during training in fighting at the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission in Burien, Wash. While some critics say that good officers already consider themselves protectors and that police need the best equipment to defend themselves and the public, many law enforcement leaders see a need for a broader change in police training and culture.

“It struck a chord,” said Lyle Mann, executive director of the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board. “There was this feeling that the militarization, the focus on officer safety, this whole confrontational kind of thing was morphing in a way that didn’t feel good to those progressive chiefs.”

The Justice Department

tics classes. Recruits can fail a training exercise if they use force when it may have been avoidable.

Where recruits were once berated by instructors and indoctrinated with stories about police killed in the line of duty, they are now offered lessons from neuroscience about how the brain reacts to respect or disrespect.

Washington’s training commission and a member of Obama’s task force.

Rahr, a former sheriff, took over the commission three years ago, and among her first priorities was dropping the requirement that recruits salute staff members. Instead, they are required to politely begin a conversation, just as officers might be expected to do with citizens on the street.

“The traditional thinking is you’ve got to scare the crap out of them so they’re ready and they don’t get hurt,” Rahr said. “I completely understand that. But you can take it too far, to the point where you make them into a soldier and they’re viewing everyone as an enemy and a potential threat.”

She stressed that Washington’s academy remains as physically demanding as ever.

During a recent mock scene, Patrick Barnes, a recruit from the Clark County Sheriff’s Office in the Vancouver area, entered

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has spent \$1.5 million so far on Blue Courage, and it has been introduced at the New York City and Baltimore County police departments, as well as academies in Nebraska and Arizona.

Washington state’s academy has boosted the training hours devoted to handling people with drug or mental problems, and Blue Courage principles have been incorporated into firearms and defensive tac-

They are taught that police can’t do their jobs unless citizens see their authority as legitimate — something that is eroded with every questionable use of force, rude interaction or corrupt cop.

They are given copies of the Constitution and challenged to think about it. “In my career, my only training in the Constitution was how to get around it,” said Sue Rahr, executive director of

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