Flawed culture, not poor training

Mentality that led to death of George Floyd is a character issue.

By Louis M. Delmar

Recently, I received an email from a member of our community regarding the video involving the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis. The citizen was very disturbed by the involved officers’ actions and inactions, and inquired if the LaGrange Police Department had specific training to avoid this type of incident. He wanted to understand and be assured that LPG officers are better trained and care more than what this video represents of the Minneapolis Police Department and “other places that officer conduct is called into question.”

I responded to his email, but because of the number of comments and concerns I have received from people in our city, I feel it is necessary to publicly address this reprehensible law enforcement use of force.

In my opinion, the death of George Floyd is not a police training issue, but rather a result of a troubled culture. I can absolutely and personally assure our citizens that the culture of the LaGrange Police Department is one of community partnerships, collaboration and service.

That can only occur if our officers of use of force are trained and consistent with best practice, department policy and training.

What is critically important in any police use of force incident is accountability. At the LaGrange Police Department, in any police encounter with an application of force there are levels of review. These independent reviews include the shift supervisor, division commander, professional standards, training and, finally, me. A part of this process is the viewing of body camera recordings of all officers.

The LPG officers who were not trained in police use of force did not receive the training that all officers are required to undergo. They were not trained in how to handle the situation appropriately.

The failure to intervene by the officers who were present at the scene and the release of the incident video which grossly mischaracterized the nature of George Floyd’s death reflect a lack of core values that should be a concern to any police officer. Particularly in light of the fatal police shooting of Justine Ruszczyk, a unarmed woman who had called 911 seeking help.

We were shot by a Minneapolis police officer several years ago where there was no video or audio of the shooting and the officer who fired the fatal shots refused to answer investigators’ questions. He was convicted of murder in 2018. Officers like these should be red flags to any agency that their policies and training are not mirrored in some of their critical incidents. I believe most officers with the Minneapolis Police Department are caring professionals, but clearly there are some who are not.

The key to our culture at the LaGrange Police Department is our understanding that we must hire individuals who have a commitment to service and who care about people. I cannot train officers to care, but that commitment to personal and professional growth is crucial in our recruitment and selection process, particularly during the background investigation stage.

This is why only 10% of applicants who apply to be LaGrange police officers successfully complete the selection and training process. It is why we hire citizens on our hiring board, so they can evaluate applicants and help us ensure the officers we hire will provide the level of service our community deserves.

Like anyone viewing the George Floyd video, I was sickened by what I saw. It was outrageous and inexcusable.

I also know it’s not reflective of the good officers I know and work with on a daily basis. I believe it reflects the bravery and integrity of my colleagues. I do appreciate the fact that our community is engaged and question police leadership to ensure that what happened in Minneapolis could not happen here.

At that point, I want every citizen of our community to attend our citizens police academy, which provides an opportunity for an in-depth review of not only our use of force training but also the various components of our police department. An educated and informed citizenry that questions police action contributes to police accountability.

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