



Reconciliation and community well-being: Collaborating by design in the city of Winnipeg

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With over 40 years of Canadian law enforcement experience, I have lived through sea changes in technology, social demands, gender and cultural awareness, and responsiveness. I have observed a positive, yet slow trajectory in the relationship between police and Indigenous people in Canada. Today, as the inaugural Team Lead of Winnipeg's newly established Community Safety Team, I am striving to carry on and continue to improve those positive relationships. This opportunity to consolidate our city's efforts in community safety and well-being offers a promising model that will inform others around the world as we all try to remove the often intractable and deep systemic barriers to well-being and social equity in our respective communities.

The historic tension between Indigenous people and the police is well documented through high-profile inquiries and commissions that have flowed from tragic clashes across Canada, including too many right here in the city located where the Red and Assiniboine rivers meet. On a larger scale, confrontations across Canada have stemmed from long-simmering conflicts over land ownership and occupation, while others have been derived from the simple challenges of sharing spaces at the local level.

The police, while struggling to remain impartial, are often dragged in as reluctant but duty-bound agents of the state. They are repeatedly thrust into difficult enforcement roles that move them away from the preferred image as impartial peacekeepers into situations in which they are perceived as more concerned with enforcing laws or protecting property than with the well-being of individuals. The police are also often faced with the challenge of fulfilling their law enforcement duties while balancing peoples' rights to protest and exercise free speech.

Sometimes, it is the most high-profile events that have inflamed police–community conflict. It is important to point out, however, that it is just as likely that many lower-profile daily events and lived experiences can have a larger overall effect. Among my policing colleagues, we have shared a conventional understanding that any one negative event can undo years of positive trust building. I believe there is ample evidence that most Canadians take pride in our multiculturalism, and in our characteristic respect for a society built upon diversity and inclusiveness. A lot of Canadians

will have difficulty acknowledging even the most blatant injustices that have made national news. But for those most affected, such incidents may amplify a host of exclusionary and unjust realities encountered in daily life.

In my own experience, I have seen a significant change in organizational cultures as they pertain to racial and gender bias and sensitivity to diversity in the Canadian policing profession. This alone offers a constructive starting point for a new trajectory of reconciliation in the justice system. Now, we need to do more, and we must be sure more than ever that we do it together, beyond policing alone, and across the broader spectrum of the human services and community life. Getting at the root causes of social problems, I believe, is the essence of reconciliation.

Conventional wisdom is that we cannot overcome or even make a dent in most social issues through unilateral law enforcement. Without addressing the root causes of problems, prosecutions will have little effect. When former Police Chief Devon Clunis took office, he assigned me for several years to help drive his vision of crime prevention through social development. We strived to make the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS) more problem-solving oriented, seeking to address the root causes of social issues rather than only the symptoms.

Crime is most often a symptom of deeper issues, not a cause of them. If you keep arresting a child involved in gang activity without interrupting what brings them to the gang, the child is doomed to repeat their criminal activity. The same dynamics apply to substance use, and we know that the required factors apply to many other conditions that marginalize some, heighten risks for many, and diminish social equity for everyone. Going forward, we must strive more to connect people in need with all the available and most appropriate resources in the community to address their problems.

Partnering across social agencies is critical. Some of the most highly celebrated initiatives in modern policing have involved partnering police and social workers for a full range of services for clients. One example is the counter-exploitation work I was involved in as the sergeant in charge of the WPS Missing Persons Unit from 2005 to 2010. We collaborated with partners in the child protection system, taking innovative approaches to intervening in the sex trafficking and exploita-

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tion of young women and girls. Police officer–social worker partnerships allow social workers to operate more safely. Child protection workers bring expanded powers under the Child and Family Services Act that the police can use to broaden the scope of their authorities and increase their effectiveness in protecting children.

Through these and other collaborations, we have led Canada to change the paradigm around counter-exploitation, identifying vulnerable children and wrapping the full range of services around them. We overcame historical systemic animosity by sharing information, resources, and authorities and working together for the common goal of rescuing and protecting children. Multi-sectoral approaches are more common now, and are decidedly the way of the future. It only makes sense as every social problem overarches the mandates of social services, health, child welfare, education, police agencies, and many other community-based specialties.

The same principle applies to trust building. Reconciliation cannot be imposed on people; it has to be done in partnership with everyone feeling they are contributing. A colonial attitude is to tell people, “This is your problem, and this is how we are going to fix it.” A conciliatory attitude listens more and creates an environment in which everyone plays a part in identifying problems as well as solutions. Reconciliation is everyone’s responsibility, and it must be shared.

WINNIPEG’S NEW TEAM

Winnipeg has had a growing crisis of unsheltered people living in encampments throughout the city. While most disenfranchised people are peaceful and dealing to the best of their ability with an unlucky draw in life’s lottery, many struggle with addictions and various mental health issues. Those without homes often ride the buses and sleep in bus shelters to escape the brutal elements of our prairie climate. The bus shelters have become a growing network of unintended homeless shelters, depriving regular riders from using them. It is a life-threatening problem when it is minus 40 degrees Celsius as one can freeze to death within minutes. City crews have done regular clean-ups, and it is normal to find shopping carts and piles of syringes accumulated overnight, from the day prior. Methamphetamine-induced violence has become commonplace on buses and in shelters, to the extreme that it has affected ridership, and made it difficult for Winnipeg Transit to retain or hire enough new drivers. It is a difficult social problem as there are not enough shelters and we have a shortage of affordable housing in our province. Transit is a refuge for many. Offering safe transportation for Indigenous people to community resources is included among the recommendations of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In his 2023 election campaign, Mayor Scott Gillingham promised to do something about the crisis in Winnipeg, and safety within the city’s transit system. Once elected, he followed through with the commitment, and a permanent new team was funded. The unique challenge and clear imminent need for it enticed me to apply for the job, as the Mayor’s vision aligned with my own. We both felt a compassionate, multi-sectoral, and collaborative approach was needed. I left policing to contribute to it.

We have currently completed the establishment of Winnipeg’s new Community Safety Team (CST) in a record-

breaking 6 months. The first cohort consists of 23 officers and two support staff, with me as Team Lead reporting to the city’s Chief Administrative Officer. The officers were all selected for their compassionate attitude toward service delivery, combined with the ability to be trained to use force responsibly for self-defence and to protect others when required. The team is highly diversified and representative of differing age, experience, gender, and cultural backgrounds. They all share a passionate commitment that was tested from the first day, as they were asked to quit their jobs and start training for this new team within 2 weeks.

We brought in special training to provide trauma-informed, compassionate interventions to improve a sense of safety for all citizens. While the initial commitment is entirely focused on the transit system, the team is envisioned with a broader mandate to address social problems across the city. The long-term vision is to prove the concept, and then likely scale up. Similar initiatives have been built across Canada, with variations in most provinces. In Winnipeg, we are taking a uniquely trauma-informed and compassionate approach. Empowered by unique changes to the provincial Police Services Act, and the city of Winnipeg, the Safety Officers embody the best qualities of social work and law enforcement.

Creating something from a blank page was wrought with challenges, but also presented great opportunities as we remained true to the original vision. One of those values is a determination to make this new team a leader in reconciliation. We initiated training with wise words from an Indigenous Elder, and ended it with the graduation in the same way. We are striving to show an open-mindedness to improving law-enforcement-Indigenous trust. The team’s training included Indigenous perspectives, cultural sensitivity, and an emphasis on empathic conflict resolution and partnership with community organizations. We followed up the first 2 weeks on the street with a full day of teachings and a sweat lodge for the entire team. One thing I am excited about is the “round room” built into our new office, large enough for a permanent circle of chairs that we utilize daily for our ongoing team debriefings and community collaboration and sharing. We attribute this cultural practice to the incredible bond our team has developed, as well as providing the opportunity to support mental health by discussing daily events and lessons learned, as a team.

Our first two months of deployment in the street was positive. We learned many lessons and clarified roles with the emergency services we sought to support. More importantly, we saved several lives, with lifesaving first aid, resolved hundreds of disputes, and lent support-finding resources and alternatives for hundreds of unsheltered people. I view this new initiative in our city as a positive reconciliation effort and believe that our experience will inform similar initiatives across Canada and beyond. The long-term outcomes are yet to be seen, but the need for multi-sector partnerships like this are inevitable and, in my view, are here to stay.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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