

Art Acevedo—A Profile in Law Enforcement Leadership

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Welcome to another episode of *The Beat*. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. Our guest today is a dynamic figure in America's law enforcement community. Art Acevedo was born in Havana, Cuba, and immigrated to the United States with his family at a young age. He joined the California Highway Patrol in 1986, rose through the ranks, and was named the chief in 2005. He then served as chief of the Austin Police Department in Texas for more than nine years, moved on to be the chief in Houston, was the president of the Major City Chiefs Association, was chief in the City of Miami, and currently heads the Aurora Police Department in Colorado. Chief Acevedo, welcome to *The Beat*.

Chief Art Acevedo

00:58

Hey, thank you. It's great to be on. I really appreciate you having me on.

Donelan

01:02

Absolutely. So we always ask the same question of everyone when we first start, but I'm just going to warn you, I'm going to ask you a follow-up question. So the first question is: What got you interested in law enforcement overall? And then I'm going to ask you what's keeping you in it.

Acevedo

01:17

Oh, those are great questions. First, I was born in Cuba. I was raised to believe, and my brothers and sisters were raised to believe, by my father, that when we received political asylum in 1968 that we received the greatest gift of all and that's the gift of freedom. And my dad and mom raised us to be patriots and to give back to this country. So I grew up wanting to be one of three things, either police officer, or West Point graduate, or a prosecutor. And they used to call me the policeman as a kid because I'd always play cops and robbers and fight you if you wanted me to be the bad guy, right?

And so I did it for 35 years, took a little break, came back, and now I'm working on my 36th year. And the reason I came back is I missed it. I missed public service. I missed police officers. I missed the camaraderie. I missed the challenge. But most importantly, I missed the opportunity to speak out on bad policing and to speak up and recognize and support good policing. And so I'm happy to be back, and I'm happy to be on the show with you today.

Donelan

02:07

Chief, did you take any time down? Are you a golfer? I know you're a baseball fan.

Acevedo

02:12

No. No golfing for me. I'm too competitive, and that takes up too much time. And in order to be good at it, you'd have to play quite a bit. And when you've been a police chief in three major American cities and chief of the California Highway Patrol, if you're golfing too much, you probably aren't doing a very good job. I like playing basketball. I like going to baseball games. I love going to movies. And that's really my therapy.

Donelan

02:33

And you can still get those in while being chief.

Acevedo

02:35

Amen. Absolutely.

Donelan

02:36

Yeah. You've got to have that balance. So I'm not a fan of labels, but if you had to describe your own labels, some have described you as both reformer and traditionalist, what sort of box, if you had to place yourself in a box, would you? Do you think that's an accurate description?

Acevedo

02:53

You know, I would say that. Yeah, I mean, because you don't throw out the baby with the bathwater, right? There are traditional aspects of policing that I think are of value, and I think there's some that have to evolve. And part of that is really dictated by the community that we serve and the community expectations, you know, we have to operate with the consent of the people that we serve, because the day they don't willingly... that the majority of the American people aren't willingly supporting us and we're in big trouble. And so I think that you have to evolve as public expectations change. And so I think that would be fair to say that I'm a little bit of both, which makes me practical. How's that?

Donelan

03:31

I do like that. And I think you're accurate. So just staying on this topic, and correct me if I'm wrong anywhere here, you were vocal about issues on police reform following the murder of George Floyd. You've been a proponent of both transparency and accountability. Yet it sounds like you opposed bail

reform while you were chief of police in Houston. And it seems that you have supporters on both sides. You've got supporters who are tough on crime, and you have people who support you who are smart on crime. Does that sound accurate?

Acevedo

04:00

Yeah. Look, what happens is that people, depending on the prism through which they're looking at whatever issue it is, they're going to hear what they want to hear sometimes. They're going to ignore what they don't want to hear. That is a misrepresentation, I think, from some of my progressive community members in Houston where they'd like to say that I'm against bail reform. That is absolutely wrong. I don't believe in cash bail because quite honestly it does disproportionately impact communities of color and poor communities to include poor White communities as well.

I believe that true bail reform should be about a validated risk assessment tool that pre-trial, what you look at is, A) what is the risk of releasing this person pre-trial? What risk would that pose for the public? A risk of serious injury or death. So what's the risk of public safety?

The second piece is, what is the risk of re-offending because even if it's a misdemeanor or shoplifting, people can't opt out of obeying the law. If you have the same person coming in and committing whatever crime it is time and again, eventually that not only hurts public safety, doesn't only hurt the way people feel about safety in their community, ultimately, it hurts the efforts that we are trying to make across our country to evolve and reform the criminal justice system.

So what... The second piece again is, what is the risk of re-offending? And the third piece of the risk assessment should be, what are the risks of absconding? Because those that say I'm against bail reform are those that believe that no matter what the person is in jail for, charged with, no matter what their criminal history is, and no matter what the risk is, or that they pose, and no matter how often they re-offend, you know... I was told specifically by one of the position, Rodney Ellis, who was a former state senator in Texas, and who I've worked with many times, and he's a commissioner in Harris County, that he doesn't believe anybody should be held pre-trial.

And I have a problem with that because we are having people in too many instances committing acts of violence up to and including murder. And these are individuals in Harris County. Close to 200 folks have been murdered by individuals that had already been arrested for violent crime, charged with violent crimes with a history of committing violent crimes, and convictions for violent crimes, going in one door out the other on either an ankle monitor or personal bond or very low bail like 300 bucks or something, and that's a problem.

That is irresponsible. And I think, eventually, that's going to hurt legitimate reform. And so I am a reformer. But to me, reform has to be based on common sense, and it has to start with, first and foremost, what is best for the safety of the victims in the community, and then we move towards what is right for the person that's going out and making bad decisions in terms of hurting others.

Donelan

06:42

It has been historically a challenge. You'll hear community members or families or victims of crime. And when the police find the suspect, and it turns out that they have a lengthy criminal rap sheet and that they were on probation or not on probation, but you look at the crimes that they were found guilty of committing, that you scratch your head and it's "why was this person out on the streets?" And then you have police officers who often say we're locking the same people up over and over again, and that's frustrating and demoralizing for them. And then you had the pandemic. Did you see this subject sort of really take on a new life once the pandemic hit and there were those real challenges with getting people to work, the people that kept the court system going? Did you see that change in terms of the effect on the crimes you were seeing on the street and just the discussion of the topic overall?

Acevedo

07:36

Listen, I'm not sure exactly what happened, but I believe that COVID just has had a really crazy impact on the psyche of too many people in this country. The kind of acts of violence that we were seeing for a couple of years there where people were just making spur of the moment, reacting with emotion without thinking, and just shooting folks left and right, and it was something that I hadn't seen in many years of policing.

And when you look at the impact of not having courts working, you know, the way they needed to be, cases that are languishing because of COVID, jury trials going by the wayside, it just brought everything to a standstill. And then on top of that, the explosion of violence by young people, by teenagers, has really gone from challenging to really bad in the last two to three years.

You wonder of the fact that these young people didn't have schools to go to. Many of them were at home alone. It was a perfect storm. And so I think that COVID and those shutdowns, and everything else, schools shutting down, really has had an absolute negative impact on society. And now, we've got to play catch-up and figure out how we can re-center, refocus, and re-establish some normalcy because I don't know about you and where you live, but it just seems to me that when I look around, the whole nation and almost, you know, we look at around the world, we've been off our axis, off the rails.

And so I'm hopeful now that kids are back into school, and we seem to have learned to operate across the economic spectrum and across the different disciplines and everything else that maybe we can try to get recalibrated in terms of the way we fight crime and in terms of the way that we deal with mental health. I think if you talk with mental health practitioners, more and more young people are experiencing emotional problems more than ever. And so, I think that it exacerbated our challenges with mental health. And now, we're going to have to really refocus and, I think, accelerate our commitment and amount of funding we put into actually helping people with their mental health, not just in the community, but even in law enforcement and the military and across society.

Donelan

09:52

So I want to dig a little deeper into something you just mentioned, which was the violence being committed by youth because I'm in the Washington D.C. area, and I don't know if it's anecdotal or if the numbers are showing it. So not [to] put you in a test sort of situation, but is it anecdotal observations that you're having that these suspects are getting younger, or are you actually seeing that play out in the data?

Acevedo

10:14

Oh, God. Listen, I think that when you go to most of the big cities and when we get together as managers and city chiefs, we're all talking about it. We're talking about the fact that young people... We can't put our finger on it, but it just seems that our suspects that are going out and just our robbery crews, our carjacking crews, you know, our shooters, our trigger pullers, are young people and they're up. And I think if you start looking at the data and data scientists and criminologists start looking at this closely, it is going to... Absolutely, the data will show that it has become a huge problem.

And the other part of that is that it seems to me that what we're seeing, I just got a briefing today from our folks here in Aurora that deal with gang violence and other violent offenses, it just seems to all of us that it's becoming more and more difficult to investigate some of these things because it's no longer a hierarchy where it's easy to identify who your leaders are in some of these criminal enterprises. It's very decentralized. It's very spur of the moment. And it is, again, a bunch of young people. So we've got a lot of work to do in terms of trying to stem the flow of the number of youth that are just going out and just killing people.

Donelan

11:28

And on the same token, I mean, at least, from what I can see where I am, it's not only scary. It's heartbreaking because it's the victims, young people, I mean, 13, 14, 15, 16.

Acevedo

11:40

Yeah. And what's sad is what are they killing each other over, right? It's about "disrespected me," "you said something on social media that was offensive or I found insulting," and they're just... These kids are killing each other over minutia. I remember when I was a freshman in high school, I took two classes that summer between eighth grade and ninth grade, and a kid mentioned my mother to me. And, well, I didn't shoot them, but we got in a fistfight. That's what it used to be. Now, these kids, nowadays, they're armed. They're shooting each other over just disrespect, and they've lost respect, too many of them, for the sanctity of life.

And again, our society has a lot of work to do because I don't see it getting any better anytime soon because here in Colorado, for example, they have cut the bed space in the juvenile custody facilities where at any given night, we have about—don't quote me on the numbers—but let's say, in one of our counties here, we have, you know, 60 beds or 35 beds, and we're having a hard time holding young people accountable.

And let's face it, some of these kids that are involved in this, they really don't have a family. The streets are their family, or they sadly were born into circumstances where they're a second, third generation of a family that is involved in this type of activity. And when we put them in one door and out the other and put them right back out in the streets, we're setting them up for failure. And we're setting up the community for failure. They're going to end up either getting shot and killed or killing somebody else. And the answer is not letting them loose. The answer is trying to get them into some custodial type situation, but not just warehouse them, but actually give them the treatment, the counseling, the skills they need, coping skills they need, the emotional skills they need to change their behavior.

Now, I'll give you the first example here in Aurora. A few months ago, we arrested a 16 year old. He was armed. The semi-automatic pistol that he had was traced and tied to three homicides in Denver. He gets tried. He gets convicted, and he actually had committed an armed robbery with that same pistol. And he goes in one door, out the other, doesn't do a single day. And within a matter of a month or two, guess who's in a shootout with our police officers? The same 16 year old.

He's very lucky he didn't get shot or killed. We're lucky none of our guys got shot or killed. But I want folks that believe that we should not invest in keeping these kids off the streets and to try to change their lives around to try to look at me and tell me to my face that it was in the best interest of that young man under those circumstances to go right back out on the streets. They can't. There's just no way they can argue that was a good move by our society.

Donelan

14:18

And then whatever you feel the solution to this is, the question is, are we talking about it? I mean, it gives me great relief to hear that the major city chiefs are talking about it. You know, we're a country with 18,000 police departments and sheriffs, no national police force, no mandates, no real way to sort of set any national policy or anything like that. It's police department by police department, jurisdiction by jurisdiction, who all seem to be facing the same problem.

Now tell me this: How difficult is it to have a discussion to try and deal with an issue, a critical crisis-level issue like this involving younger suspects, younger victims, pervasiveness of this problem in a climate that you're dealing with right now in terms of negative feelings towards law enforcement? Are we in a spot where they're listening?

Acevedo

15:08

Yeah, that's a great question. Look, I think part of the challenge in our country is that too many people in positions of leadership come to work to keep their jobs instead of doing their jobs, and not enough people are willing to speak out, speak truth to power. I believe that we should have the mindset as a leader. And I always tell my people that I've had the privilege of working with and leading that—and my executive team and the folks I've worked with—that I'd rather lose my job for doing it than keeping it by not doing it. And I think therein lies the problem.

If we pick the day across this country where every law enforcement executive had a press conference, you know, just pick a day and we all get together in every county as groups of chiefs across the country and sheriffs and said, "Enough is enough. Here's what's happening. We're failing these youth, right, because they are kids. Whether they're violent or not, they're still kids, right? We're failing the youth. We're failing the community, and we've got to do something about it." If we did that, that would be so powerful. But guess what? We're not. We're not. And I just think people are, you know... You don't want to be labeled, right? You don't want to be labeled "you're insensitive," or if you're trying to combat youth violence or you're trying to make people aware, well, you must be...

Look, when I was in Austin as my first municipal police chief's job, I had my people start a Boy Scout troop in juvenile hall. And so my goal was that we can just get our hooks on one of these kids, right, and keep them in Boy Scouts when they transition out, it would be well worth it, right, because hopefully, we know that the data shows that anybody that scouts for five years or more, the graduation rate from high school is about 95 percent. Much better than a lot of rates out there for graduation and progressive. But being progressive doesn't mean coddling people. And being progressive also means doing what we need to do. I'll never forget that in Harris County, we had our county judges like the... know what they call them in other parts of the country, you know, it's the county mayor basically, and they run the juvenile hall, and they run the county jail with the sheriff, and this county commissioner had a press conference during COVID. We need to empty... We need to empty juvenile hall. These children need to be home because of COVID with their families.

And so I had to get a hold of my DA and get hold of the sheriff, and I got the data, and I said, "Listen," because they were going to do it. They were actually going to empty out juvenile hall. And I said, "Let me explain something to you about juvenile hall in most big cities today and most big urban counties. It's not my juvenile hall when I was a kid." The kids aren't in there for joyriding, right? They're not in there for, you know, stealing candy bars or... They're in there for these types of crimes. And now, don't quote me the numbers because it's been a few years, but I said, "Here we have. Let me tell you about the children." Two of them are there for capital murder—premeditated, capital murder. 11 of them are there for with murder... charged with murder. And I just went down the line. It was all very violent offenses. And could you imagine releasing all those kids back onto the streets to be, quite honestly, often there'll be adult criminal offenders that are actually manipulating and utilizing these young people.

And, thank God, because we had that press conference, and we put the word out, they backed down. But in too many places, law enforcement doesn't speak out. And I think that's a huge problem. We've got to speak out because people need to know. They need to be informed on the decisions that are being contemplated before they're actually carried out.

Donelan

18:24

So this is going to lead me perfectly into my next question, which I think is what you've been describing for the past few minutes. So, yes, here on *The Beat*, we do do our homework.

Acevedo

18:33

Oh.

Donelan

18:33

And our producer had a pre-conversation with the chief and his folks. And during that conversation, you described what you called a crisis in leadership. Is this what you're talking about?

Acevedo

18:43

Yeah, I mean, look, it's like... It's a question of leadership that goes well beyond policing. I mean, it goes across the societal spectrum. If you think about some of our elected officials, they're more interested in, you know, instead of good policy, they're more interested in good political theater. And so they make their decisions based on their respective bases. And, quite honestly, they're more interested in their next election instead of just doing their jobs. And we don't get a grip on that and a handle on that. I just don't see things getting better. People need to demand that leaders actually do their jobs and speak truth to power. And, again, it's not just in law enforcement, but quite honestly, it's in elected officials. And it's funny because sometimes elected sheriffs will tell the chiefs, "Hey, you guys are a bunch of politicians. You just do your... whatever your mayors tell you," and when in fact, they're the politicians that have to run for office.

I said, "No. You're wrong, because we're not politicians. We're men and women that... We don't run for office every four years. We run for office every single day." We're one incident away from losing our jobs. From what my officer does at three o'clock in the morning, you know, that you have nothing to do with, but you know, some elected official will run you out just to be able to say they did something. If you don't believe me, just look what happened to Erika Shields as one of the most progressive chiefs in the country. And when she was in Atlanta, she had a couple of bad incidents that ran completely contrary to what she stood for, what she expected, what she enforced, but she gets run out just so that her mayor can say that she did something, right? And then she goes to Kentucky where she's doing a phenomenal job, Department of the Consent Decree, and a new mayor gets elected. And guess what they do? They don't retain her just simply because, "Oh, you weren't my selection."

And so let's talk about that. If you don't have continuity of leadership, without continuity of leadership, you're not going to effect cultural change or you're not going to effect any kind of good outcomes because, you know, people will just wait you out. They know that you're going to be gone in 18 months to 36 months. And that's the other problem, I think, for law enforcement in our country. We don't have a good model in that there's next to zero job security for police executives across the country. And so those that can't afford to lose their jobs, sometimes, you know, and I understand it because they might have families and everything else that they need to feed, may no matter what they feel like, may not take the risk because they can't afford to lose a job. And I think that's a disservice to the American public and the American people. We need to have a better model where people can actually do their jobs instead of worrying about keeping it.

Donelan

21:06

Wow. That's super interesting. Let me ask you this, and we might have to delete this part because my math might not be right. But you said you've been in law enforcement 34 years?

Acevedo

21:15

35. 35.

Donelan

21:17

And you became a chief in '05. So does that mean basically half your career you have been a chief?

Acevedo

21:23

'05, let's see. That means... Yeah, you know what? Because I was one of those guys that, I always tell people, you know, when I became a police officer, I thought, "For sure, I'm going to do 30 years. You know, be an officer." Never thought about promoting until about two years on the job, my sergeant puts on my... I had my performance appraisal, "Hey, you need to think about being a sergeant." And quite honestly, I was working for some people. And he was one of my good sergeants actually, but I was working for some folks that were afraid of their own shadows, didn't want you to do any kind of policing because they didn't want you to create work for them. And I always tell people, "You can spend 30 years and complain about it, sit in the back of the squad room, in the roll-call room, or you can position yourself to be a change agent."

And that's why I decided early on, "I'm going to make this my career." I love what I do. I love cops. I love community because I think that I'm balanced everywhere I've been. I've left my shift, my unit, my division, my organization better shaped than the way I found it. And I think that's what leaders should do, is always try to leave the place in just a little better shape than you found it.

Donelan

22:20

I think that is an awesome goal. So let me ask you this: Given that 35-year track record, half of it in the position of chief, are we at the most polarized period in your career that you've witnessed in terms of between law enforcement and society at large?

Acevedo

22:37

Well, well, you keep asking great questions. And, look, the relationships are work, right? I always tell people that relationships are work. In my 35 years, we've had our ups and downs in terms of the relationship between the law enforcement community and the communities we serve. But here's the difference. I've never seen the division that exists in terms of the American people. We have lost the art of being pragmatic. We've lost the art of disagreeing without becoming disagreeable.

Our society is so divided. There's such a political divide in this country that I believe that's what's making this era, this time, this moment, the most difficult for our police officers because the ones that are stuck in the middle of all that craziness are these 23, 24, 25-year-old officers out there trying to do their jobs. It just seems that the world of give and take, the world of let's get along, the world of negotiating, the world of just being decent to each other, regardless of political affiliation or your position on issues—it is just, sometimes, I don't recognize the country that I was raised in. And the way we speak to each other, it's just... To me, that's what's making it really, really tough. You know, there used to be only one side, and that was the side of what's best for America. And we were above all else Americans. The one label that we always... the majority of us valued and loved and took pride in was, "I'm an American."

Now, it's not enough. It's like, you know, it's tribes, man. It is tribal. And that scares the heck out of me because we can't take for granted the past 240-something years that we've been around as a nation. And I can tell you that I don't know about you, but my sense is that if we don't find our center again as people, the conflict between the tribes that we see out there in the American public, the conflict in the political arena is just continue to make policing that much more difficult because people are just... I just don't understand it, but it is what it is, and we'll continue to do our very best to serve everybody based on our constitutional duties and the law and the policies of the organizations that we all work for out there in the 18,000 departments.

Donelan

25:08

So, Chief, in one of my lives, I've worked very closely with the police chief.

Acevedo

25:12

Yeah.

Donelan

25:13

And prior to that, I was a reporter. So, you know, you'd stand outside places and you report, and you try and give objective as a presentation of fact as you can. But once inside, it was so eye-opening to me, especially the job as the chief of police, because there were so many days I walked out of there just enraged because I knew the truth, but I knew what was percolating out in the world.

Acevedo

25:37

Yeah.

Donelan

25:37

And then this job of trying to set records straight and give facts and try to be objective and do your job—

Acevedo

25:43

Yeah.

Donelan

25:44

—as a police chief. Like if you had to describe to someone what it's like to be a police chief right now, how do you describe it?

Acevedo

25:52

I would say it feels like being a punching bag, you know.

Donelan

25:56

Yeah.

Acevedo

25:56

Hey, we've got feelings too, you know, and seems like constant crisis. And it is probably a juggling act that I don't think people can appreciate. I've always told my assistant chiefs, you know, deputy chiefs, "I don't care how many times you're the acting chief, you will never truly appreciate the complexity of the job until you are the chief, and you're the one that, you know, once you take that seat permanently, right, or you're the actual chief, there's no, 'Hey, let's go ask the chief,' right?"

And so I just don't think people appreciate that in these executive jobs, they're tough. But, quite honestly, there's nothing else I'd rather do than to be in the fight with our community and with our workforce in the fight to actually keep people safe. But I'll tell you, I don't think people appreciate just how tough it is to lead in a world of, "I got you." That's the society we live in. Americans used to always like a comeback story much more than we do today.

Americans historically have been very forgiving, but it seems like too many of us now are like, "Just lie and wait. Let's wait till somebody, says something off color or makes a mistake." And it's just like, "Bam, let's just pile on." Right? And then on top of that, now we have the era of social media, you know, the bots that are being controlled often by... and the fake news... The real fake news is being controlled by enemy states, hostile states. In other words, governments from around the world, like Iran and Russia, North Korea and others that actually we are under attack in terms of psych ops going on against the American people. And sadly, a lot of members of the public don't even recognize that. They don't realize they're being manipulated. And so when you add all that stuff—

Donelan

27:44

I'll stop you right there because 10 years ago, I know you'll agree with this—

Acevedo

27:48

Yeah.

Donelan

27:49

—you make those statements 10 years ago, you'd be like, "I sound crazy."

Acevedo

27:55

Yeah.

Donelan

27:55

But don't... Actually, I often would walk around and say, "You can't make this stuff up."

Acevedo

27:59

No, you can't. And people don't want to believe it. They don't want to believe. I can tell you on my Twitter—I'm a Twitter bug—I've actually been briefed by a federal agency. And when I use social media sometimes that I actually get targeted. I think that DHS last year tried to roll out a strategy to combat the misinformation campaign by foreign hostile nations, but they were so clumsy in the way they handled the messaging that they never got it off the ground, right?

And so just be aware that when you read stuff, if it's not coming from a recognized main street news source, if you think the mainstream media is the fake news, then that's the starting point. Then you should consider all these other media that go out there, many of them to be not fake news but atomic news. And what they're trying to do is get us to blow ourselves up from within.

Donelan

28:52

Well, it's certainly scary. I know that. And then I look at all the issues that you're facing, that everyone in law enforcement, but particularly leadership within the law enforcement community and the issues that you've now been tasked to tackle. And on a bad day you just kind of say, "Are we going to get out of this?"

Acevedo

29:11

Yeah. You know what? Look, I always tell our folks, "We can only control what we can control." And for me, that means we can control the way that we conduct ourselves as individuals and as an organization. We can control the way that we treat people that we come in contact with each and every day, which is why I always talk about relational policing. With my police officers, with my staff, I don't talk about community policing because, quite honestly, too many of us in law enforcement will say, "Hey, we don't have enough cops. We don't have enough this. We don't have enough that."

And the truth of the matter is, what we need to have is the right mindset, the right attitude, the right approach. And when we recognize that every person we come in contact with as a member of the law enforcement community, that is the beginning of a relationship, right, and maybe your only opportunity or the only time you're going to contact this member of society. And if you're not conducting yourself in a manner that's going to make a friend to the best of your ability rather than a foe, you're not doing the profession, you're not doing your department, you're not doing yourself any favor.

So I always talk about relational policing, which the acronym I came up with is TREEAT, which is T-R-E-E-A-T, TREEAT. And it's really about transparency. You know, these departments, they're always saying, "No comment," and no comment to the public is they're hiding something. That's the way they translate it. They try to suppress just about as many of the public records requests that they can. And let's face it, most of the data that we have belongs to the people. You should release if you can. So you want to be transparent. You want to have respect, treat people with respect, have self-respect, respect the organization, your chain of command, your coworkers. We need to engage the community and engage them like a chief. You can't build relationships with your workforce or the community by sitting behind your desk in your office. You've got to get out.

Get out of your police car. Go engage people in the playgrounds, in the little markets, at the street corner, outside of the 911 call loop. And I don't care how busy the officers are on patrol. No matter how busy they are, most of the times, they'll have at least an hour any given shift to at least go out and spend 30 minutes, you know, engage people outside of the 911 call loop. And when we're doing that, you're building emotional capital, right?

And that emotional capital, we need to have in the bank because we know we're going to have a mistake. We know we're not going to achieve perfection. And when you have that controversial use of force or the controversial incident, you better not be an unknown entity to the community. You better have some capital in the bank. We've got to hold each other accountable. And we did that, and we were transparent, respectful, engaging to build emotional capital, hold each other accountable. We end up building trust.

And I think with trust, we have better outcomes. We have increased officer safety, and we have better community safety. And like I always tell them, the court of public opinion matters to everything we do. It matters to our pay, our benefits, our staffing, our equipment, our facilities. It matters whether you're going to be believed or trusted by a grand jury, a criminal jury, a civil jury, you know. So let's go out there and treat people right. If we all did that in our professional lives and our personal lives with our neighbors and our coworkers and the communities that we serve and live in, that we'd end up, I think, having a much better place to be living in across the nation.

Donelan

32:17

And you need people with heart on the job.

Acevedo

32:17

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Donelan

32:18

What are your thoughts on recruitment and retention in law enforcement right now?

Acevedo

32:22

Well, first of all, let's stop saying, "People don't want to be cops because of the George Floyd protests." If I hear that one more time.

Donelan

32:29

I didn't say it.

Acevedo

32:31

I know. But how many police chiefs are going around saying that? Constantly. Look, during the summer protest, did some people quit? Probably. But the truth of the matter is since the advent of COVID, I told you all earlier that something's happened, something's in the water. I don't know what it's done to our national psyche. But, listen, we're not the only ones with a problem recruiting. Airlines are taking people off of the streets and training them to be pilots for God's sakes. That's unheard of. And I was so happy.

If you look my Twitter feed, @ArtAcevedo, A-R-T-A-C-E-V-E-D-O, you'll see that the Marshall Project did an article where they talked about that. There are so many opportunities right now, so many help wanted signs. Policing has historically been a career where immigrants, like me... It's a great career. But when the economy is the way it is now, and there's so many job openings, it's not because of George Floyd. It's because people have a lot of options.

And a lot of young people today, they want to feel valued. It's about quality of life. It's about work-life balance. And quite honestly, if you look at a lot of young people today, they'll switch jobs every two, three years. And so I think we need to market the profession differently. We need to have different sets of values, not what we valued when we were young cops, but what young people today value.

I like to market the department and the profession as, "Come to Aurora PD, you know, a place that's like family, a place where you'll be valued." And most importantly, you could look at every one of our job duties, right, whether it's patrol, all the different detective units, every one of those, you can have 30 careers and never leave, right, with continuity of employment.

So there's a way to market things, I think, would be helpful. And if we can just stop saying, "No one wants to be a cop," it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because at the end of the day, I think we can still find a lot of folks. We just have to work a little harder, and we have to be a little more creative in terms of what we emphasize.

And if it's just SWAT and stuff like that you emphasize, I think, a lot of young people today, that's not what they're interested in. They're interested in making a difference. And we probably want to talk more about the guardian piece of the job and minimize the warrior piece of the job. Having said that, we need individuals that have the mindset of a guardian and a heart of a warrior, because in order to be a true guardian, sometimes, you have to... you know, you have to shift gears and go into warrior mode. And so I just think it's going to take some work, but we can get there.

Donelan

34:51

Who should we be attracting as police officers? Who do you want to see in your department? What kind of person? What kind of ideals?

Acevedo

34:57

Yeah. I want people that have some common sense. I want people that love people. I want people that are good critical thinkers, individuals that, like I said, are quick to think then act, instead of acting without thinking. I want people that recognize that, you know, we don't have any power. What we have is authority, and that authority is given to us by the people we serve, and we don't have any special powers, right?

I want people that have, again, the mindset of a guardian that understands that the sanctity of life should be foremost in our mind and anything we can do to do our jobs, complete our duties without taking a life is really important. But I want people that, even though have that mindset, have the heart of a warrior. I mean, if you look at Uvalde, I'm sorry, but I have real heartburn with what happened.

I was in Texas and actually did a lot of media. I can just tell you that when you know children have been shot behind those closed doors, sometimes you get paid to lay down your life rather than [swerve] from the path of duty.

And so we want people that know how to turn it on and turn it off, but most importantly, care about others and... that are empathetic, they're culturally competent, that have a mind to learn and grow and evolve. And I think there's plenty of people out there that fit the bill. We're about to start a cadet program with our community college where it'll be a two-year program. And, hopefully, we'll get the funding in March, and you're going to see hopefully some good things come out of that program where they'll be working for us while they're going to college and making some money and hopefully we'll get them to come in to be police officers. So we'll see. But I think the future and the best is yet to come for the American policing profession.

Donelan

36:36

You mentioned this earlier on in the conversation, but this whole notion, and it's not necessarily a notion because it is very real in some instances where you have officers who are afraid to act, right, because you've got officers being locked up, charged with murder—

Acevedo

36:49

Yeah.

Donelan

36:50

—and you have others around them, “that’s not going to be me,” and they’re afraid to do their jobs. Have you had that conversation with a police officer? What do you say?

Acevedo

36:59

Hey, look, first, let me just start by any activists out there that might be listening, you know, where they want us to, “Hey, you know, we need the academies, need to be more like an adult learning environment, this and so on and so forth.” I always tell them, “Be careful what you wish for,” because the police academy, we turn into Little League where everybody gets a medal, right? Everybody gets a trophy. That’s the only time we’re going to have to really assess someone’s mindset, someone’s ability to handle some really dynamic situations.

And so just be careful when nobody will die, right? It's a controlled environment. So I want my academies to be tough, but I want them to be appropriate. And there's a way to do it. You can balance it. But to the officers that say they're afraid to act, listen, if you know policy, you know the law, and you stick to your tactics, that is your greatest defense. I've always told my people, "Know policy. Know the law. Know the Constitution. Wrap yourself around it, and the chances of getting in criminal trouble are, you know, very slim."

I've yet to, in any department I've worked, seen anybody go to jail for following policy or law in their training. But when you go out there, and you start acting outside of those things, now, you're outside of scope, and you put yourself at risk. So go to a department that is committed to being a learning department. Go to a department where the leadership is willing to call balls and strikes, whether it involves the actions of the men and women within the department, or when it comes to the actions of members of society. And go to a department that understands that potential of relational policing, understands that court of public opinion matters, and we need to treat people the way that we'd want our own families treated or have the cultural competency to treat people the way that they want to be treated to the best of our ability based on their beliefs, their customs, and what their values are.

And so it amazes me that we still have great young people coming on board, and I can tell you that having been through a lot in 35 years, working on 36 years, I didn't know exactly what I was getting myself into back when I did. But after being gone for almost 18 months and now being back in policing, I can say that without any hesitation, I would do it all over again today. I'd start all over again today. And I can say it's still a very noble profession something that I'd highly recommend to those that... You know, you can sit back and complain or you can get involved and make a difference.

Donelan

39:14

You know, that whole piece about thinking before you act, I mean, yes, that happens, and you have to do that in an instant. But it also screams to me that that requires a certain level of sophistication and maturity—

Acevedo

39:23

Yeah.

Donelan

39:23

—in order to do that. And so those are the people that we want out there. I think my next question is going to prove helpful to not only anyone who's in a chief position, but any police officer, any sheriff's deputy. And it's on the subject of balancing relationships, because literally every single call, every time you get out of that squad car and you're interacting with the public, a member of the public, you're balancing a relationship.

So I want to ask you as a chief of police, have witnessed it myself, you are balancing untold number of relationships. You've got your staff. You've got their families you've got to be worried about. You've got public and community expectations. You likely, just as you mentioned, every single day, you could lose your job, you know? So you've got that political consideration, the lawmakers, et cetera, those who put you in your position. You've got the unions. You've got whatever conditions are currently existing. How do you balance that all?

Acevedo

40:17

You know, I think you balance it just by not being a wind sock, by being consistent, by not looking at which way the wind's blowing, and by just being true to your calling, and just making your decisions not based on, you know, public opinion, what the union's going to do, what the media's going to do, just based on what you know to be right.

And at the end of the day, if you're true to your oath of office, you're true to what you believe to be right, you're clear, and you're consistent and you speak truth to power, you know what? I tell you that when people know you speak your mind and when you say what you say is what you really believe and not based on which way the wind's blowing, I think that people may disagree with you, but on balance most reasonable people will respect and appreciate the candor and appreciate the fact that you're willing to be real because people know BS when they see it. And I think they appreciate people that are real and that don't try to just blow smoke. And I think, to me, that's the key.

Donelan

41:12

Based on what you just said, it's not a mystery here, right? It's just be real, and people will appreciate and respect that. There's a thousand things I could talk to you about because your wealth of information and with your experience. So before we leave, I just want to ask you, is there anything you want to talk about before we leave here?

Acevedo

41:30

Yeah. I mean, I just would like to say to everybody that's listening, look, we can't... Be careful what we wish for out there. We need to be thoughtful in the decisions that we make. And if any elected officials, the same thing, you know. I just got hit by a drunk driver going the opposite way that came into my lane Sunday night. They kept going. And, you know, thank God it wasn't two or three feet more to... into my side of the street because it would have been a head-on instead of a side-swipe, and—

Donelan

41:53

Oh my god.

Acevedo

41:53

—I had to chase them down. And I think it illustrates that we're living in a time where people, they don't consider unintended consequences. The notion of let's not have the police enforce traffic laws, well, guess what? Drunk drivers don't discriminate. They kill rich people, poor people, middle-class people, male, female, you know, Black, White, Brown, Asian. It doesn't matter to them. They're killing everybody.

And what we're seeing is that more and more departments are really reducing and backing away from traffic enforcement. And consequently, what we're seeing is historically high and extreme uptick in traffic fatalities.

And so let's all commit to being practical, looking at... for evidence-based and supported strategies. And let's just widen our field of vision. And while we make our decisions and our policy decisions, let's not make them on emotion, but make them on what's the best for this nation and for the people we serve.

And lastly, let's be kind to one another. It's okay to disagree. We don't have to agree on everything to respect one another and care about one another.

Donelan

42:57

Alright, Chief. You're out there doing the work. You aren't sitting at home armchair quarterbacking.

Acevedo

43:03

Yeah, yeah.

Donelan

43:04

That's certainly not you. We appreciate your service, and thank you so much for your time here. If somebody wants to reach out to discuss anything with you or find out more about any of the programs that you discussed that might be a good fit for their community, how might they reach you?

Acevedo

43:19

First and foremost, just remember we're hiring at the Aurora Police Department for all kinds of positions, not just police officers, so give us a call. And they can reach me on my email, aacevedo@auroragov.org. That's A-A-C-E-V as in Victor-E-D-O@A-U-R-O-R-A G-O-V as in Victor-dot-org. If not, follow me on Twitter, and send me a direct message @ArtAcevedo on Twitter.

Donelan

43:48

And that is? Could you spell that one for me too?

Acevedo

43:50

A-R-T-A-C-E-V as in Victor-E-D-O. @ArtAcevedo. And you can find me on Twitter very easily.

Donelan

43:57

Thank you, Chief. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you for sharing your experiences and your knowledge with us. And thank you again for your time because I know it's precious. You're a busy man. We appreciate it.

Acevedo

44:07

Yay, I'm honored to be on. And again, if I can be of service, please call on me or any member of our department.

Donelan

44:12

Absolutely. Alright. Well, thank you, everyone, for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

44:18

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

45:15

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