

#79 (KASSY ALIA RAY)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime features conversations with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. When Kassy Alia Ray's police officer husband was murdered on duty in 2015, she channeled that grief into founding an organization dedicated to improving police community partnerships. We talk about her journey and what police departments can do to mitigate the effects of similar tragedies.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I am Jerry Ratcliffe, and this is Reducing Crime.

In September 2015, officer Greg Alia was shot and killed when he and two other police officers responded to a call to a suspicious person at the Richland Mall in Forest Acres, South Carolina. A seven-year veteran of the police department, he was just 32 and left behind a wife and six-month-old son.

His widow, Dr. Kassy Alia Ray Drew on this tragedy and along with her PhD in clinical community psychology, used this unique combination of experience and training to found Serve & Connect, a non-profit organization focused on fostering positive change through sustainable police community partnerships. Kassy's work aims to ignite transformative change in police community relationships and is featured on NBC's Today Show and in Time Magazine. She sits on numerous boards, including the International Association of Chiefs of Police subcommittee on community policing, and the American Psychological Association's Presidential Task Force on reducing police officer use of force. We caught up at the Annual International Association of Chiefs of Police Conference in Boston last October. And as you join us, I was just explaining that I was in recovery mode from having been, let's just say generously over-served in the bar the night before.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Oh no.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was networking.

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Kassy Alia Ray:

Oh, it's important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, the networking was successful, but now I'm paying a price. No, it's okay. How's your conference going?

Kassy Alia Ray:

It's going great. Got in yesterday morning, long day. I have two little kids, and so I feel like before, did you have kids?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

None that I know of. None that I'm paying for, anyway. Well, occasionally I buy Caleb a pizza, but apart from that.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Before I would be like, "Oh, I'm going to extend my stay. I'm going to do all the tour, I'm going to travel," and then now it's leave the last moment and get out as soon as I can. And so, full day yesterday, but got a great rest and it's been an awesome day so far today.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I think that's one of the things that when you travel a lot, there is that really good intention about, if I just say an extra day, I can see all the really cool things, and then just other time crunches and other time pressures, and it's like I feel like all I see is hotels and conference rooms.

Kassy Alia Ray:

I know, but then you get to see lots of great people too.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Kassy Alia Ray:

So that's the big win.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't know how anybody else even leads into this, because I mean, I was reading your history and reading the story, and where you've come from. It must be weird, right? Because as an academic I can do new research and I can do new things, and so I can constantly be changing the story, and you must have had to tell the same story a thousand times or more.

Kassy Alia Ray:

I'm comfortable too, so don't worry about, I'm a very open person.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I appreciate that. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here doing this. But what I'm trying to, this is why I record for an hour, and have 30 minutes where I have to sound myself less stupid. I mean, we know that there's all sorts of issues around sort of trauma revisiting these things, but it's almost like revisiting this incident where you've come from, you've turned it into this really great positive.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's very, very impressive.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Well, I appreciate that. I am very thankful and blessed to have amazing teammates and incredible partners, and people who have believed in the vision that we have. And so, it's certainly not me alone, but I'm thankful that I've been able to really carry on Greg's legacy and help his story live on in new ways.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Have you found a way, and I suppose I'm leading up to saying, do you want to tell us Greg's story and your story, to tell it that makes the points that you want to make in some regard?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Well, I think when you talk about the points that you want to make, it really depends on the audience who you're telling it to. While what happened to Greg, that story doesn't evolve. What does is life and society, and the issues that we're facing as a country, and in policing do evolve. And so, I think there are pieces that become at times maybe more relevant than others, but at the core of it, I do really believe that the heart and soul of the message, that North Star really remains steadfast.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So we should get to the crux of the story, shall we? Which is that your husband Greg, was a police officer with the Forest Acres Police Department in-

Kassy Alia Ray:

South Carolina.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... South Carolina, and it's the call that comes out a gazillion times a day to police departments across the country and overseas. Suspicious person at the shopping mall. He turns up, the guy goes running, turns, fires a weapon, and kills Greg, who dies at the scene.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm on these Twitter and these list servers. It sounds terrible, but a sort of very typical story that we see far too frequently. But for you, it's obviously this incredible personal thing. And I think for those of us who see these things come out on a regular basis, it's really important to remember that there's a whole story and a family around, and a whole police family as well, a personal family that ties to this, because we see these things so damn often. And I'm not trying to minimize Greg's story-

Kassy Alia Ray:

No, I 100% understand what you mean.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... but I think it's important to understand, never forget the humanity in all of these things.

Kassy Alia Ray:

I couldn't agree more. And that is very much at the heart and soul of why I began responding the way that I did after Greg's death. So if you think back, so it was September 30th, 2015, the end of September, what marked nine years. And at the time, if you think back to it, it really was at the start of the modern unrest that we've seen this nearly 10 years. I mean, so you come off of Ferguson and Michael Brown, I mean all the multiple cases from 2014 to 2015.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I don't think anybody's denying the shift that took place, anybody's on the ground in policing recognizes that shift took place, regardless of what some folk might say.

Kassy Alia Ray:

And I do really appreciate that for many, especially on the community side that will say that, I mean these are issues that have existed for generations. So at the time I was working towards getting my PhD in clinical community psychology, so in a very academic space, and I was married to a cop.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you had a six-month-old.

Kassy Alia Ray:

He was born on March 31st, 2015, yes. Sal. I remember that the message that I received at the time was whether it be on the news or especially on social media, or just in comments and in classes, or even just at dinner table with friends, it was a reminder of these growing tensions all around us. And what I felt was that I was really being forced to make a choice. What I was being told was I had to either be for police or for community, and that didn't make sense to me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is a horrible, completely unrealistic dichotomy, yeah.

Kassy Alia Ray:

But that's how the narrative was being set up, at least from my perspective at the time. What was it like for you?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, I think very much it was the same. And I think that that was exacerbated after the murder of George Floyd as well. And I think we have to get away from that, because it drives polarization. Not that we have any issues with polarization in the country at all. Here we are recording about two weeks before a very polarized presidential election. This massive sea change has affected policing and been, I think disastrous for moving communities forward in many cases, yeah.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Absolutely. And so, even before Greg was killed, and I'll never forget standing in our kitchen, it was right around the time of the Freddie Gray riots in Baltimore. I asked Greg what he thought about it. He said, "Kassy, no one wants a bad cop brought to justice more than a good cop." For every one negative story you hear in the news, there are thousands of positive stories happening every day that go unnoticed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've never met a cop that said, "Oh yeah, I'd be really happy working next to a bad cop, a corrupt cop, a lazy cop." Nobody wants to work with these people.

Kassy Alia Ray:

And at the same time too though, to Greg's point, we need to address the negative circumstances and in some cases negative officers that are involved, but also for every one negative, how many more positive stories are happening every day all around us? Anyway, so after Greg was killed, I'll never forget, I was at his parents' house. That's where the police took me after they told me that Greg was gone and we went to inform his parents, and the first call came in from a reporter with a local newspaper, and he wanted to hear stories about Greg. And he said that they were all shocked when I agreed to talk. He was a new reporter, so they put him on the task, because no one wants to talk to the families of victims afterwards. And so, I talked about Greg and I told his story.

And that's how it went, anytime that someone reached out, whether it be an elected official or a media outlet, I did speak up and I did it for a number of reasons. But to your point earlier, one of the big reasons was I think far too often we forget that there are real people behind the stories that we see in the news. And especially at that time, I didn't want Greg's death to become a tally mark for one team versus another. I wanted to hit pause and remind us all that this was a human being. And Greg was quietly funny. He wasn't the big jokester in the room, but if you listen closely-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, you got to watch after them.

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Kassy Alia Ray:

... hilarious. And he was incredibly kind, the kindest person I believe I've ever met. And he was my best friend. He was the father of our child, who turned six months old the day he was killed. He was a great husband, he was a loved friend, a son, a brother, all these things that we forget about. And so, your point resonates with me so deeply.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It sounds like you almost found expressing all of that in some way helpful or cathartic in very small degree. I mean, you are the clinical psychologist, not me. I'm a geographer. I don't even know where North Carolina is.

Kassy Alia Ray:

But yet we're both in implementation science. Look at us here. I do think there is something healing, especially when we can connect with others. I think that we as a society are really terrible at talking about grief and loss, and we want to place it in the little box. You have your period of mourning and then after that period you're allowed to move forward. And grief is not linear. I'll never forget, it was maybe a year or so ago, sometimes things just knock me off my feet and I was having a really tough day and I'm a really ugly crier, so I really dislike crying in front of people. And someone I know-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't think any of us are.

Kassy Alia Ray:

I was like, it's little nice little tears.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

None of us do that elegantly.

Kassy Alia Ray:

But a friend of mine happened to come upon me and she was like, "I was wondering when you'd really grieve." And I was like, "Pardon me?" It's just this notion that eight years later that I was finally letting it hit. And it's like, that's not how grief works.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Kassy Alia Ray:

So I do think it's important to be able to tell our stories and connect with one another, and see that we're not alone. I'll say the thing that is the most healing for me is in stepping outside of my pain to see that others hurt too and finding ways to help. And I think that's one of the more healing things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was this the first line of duty death for Forest Acres Police Department?

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Kassy Alia Ray:

There was one in the '70s.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There was nobody around who remembered much of that then?

Kassy Alia Ray:

No, the Chief of Police was there at the time when that line of duty death happened. But Forest Acres is a municipality in Richland County, right out outside of the city of Columbia. I remember Greg's friends teasing him for being a police officer in Forest Acres, just because of how safe and idyllic it really can seem. But crime happens everywhere. And for him, it happened at 8:00 AM on a Wednesday morning.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. And of course, I just made a joke about not being good at geography and I just called it North Carolina, when it's South Carolina. That's how bad my geography education is, and I've got two degrees in it. Which then brings in mind the chief will have remembered, but not really been in a leadership position back in the '70s. Did the police department deal with it well?

Kassy Alia Ray:

I think our community did an amazing job. I mean, they still, nine years later are there for our family, even though that chief has retired and a new one has stepped in. We are very blessed in our community, but I do know that not all communities are that way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I suppose one of the things I'm trying to figure out is what are the things that police departments can do well to help? We can be so well-meaning as human beings, but we can often do things well and inadvertently do things badly.

Kassy Alia Ray:

And this is something I'm very passionate about, not only because I'm a police widow and lived that experience, but we also have, just as our community did for my son and I. And so, here I am, 28 years old, suddenly a widow with an infant baby in grad school, married to a cop. Not only did I have the experience of extreme grief and heartbreak, but also very real fear of how we'd live.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right, yeah. What, you're saying grad school doesn't pay the bills well enough on its own?

Kassy Alia Ray:

I know. And that cop salary, he definitely joined to be rich and famous. So, I know the impact of when our community, his friends had set up a fundraiser and it really gave me the space to grieve in peace. And so, just a few months after Greg was killed, one of our first initiatives we ever did was, I was sitting in the Secretary of State's office establishing

what was then called Heroes in Blue, and now is Serve & Connect as a nonprofit. When we learned that an officer in Greenville, South Carolina had been shot and killed, leaving behind his pregnant wife and two little boys, and our team set up a fundraiser for his family and raised over \$193,000. And ever since, we have established or offered to raise money for any officer that is killed or critically injured in the line of duty in South Carolina, and I believe we've just surpassed 1.2 million, 100% of which has gone back.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's fantastic. Congratulations. I mean, it's a terrible thing that in that great moment of grief and stress, and pressure, that we have to worry about paying the bills.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yeah. Well, and I know that police are not the only one. The same is true for any loss, especially when you talk about losing a spouse. And so, there are many times I acknowledge the privilege and support that we receive. That's different because he was a police officer, and I'm very grateful for that. But to your question, because of how we've responded, I have had the deep honor of working with too many families in South Carolina. So a few things that really jump out to me, both as a police widow and also in the work that I do, is proactively, I wish that... Greg was 32 at the time, and even though he's in policing and you know that it's a dangerous job, you don't live every day thinking about the risk.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm not sure you could, but yeah.

Kassy Alia Ray:

But so, on our chalkboard actually wrote will, that was on our to-do list, that just hadn't gotten done. And I know that there are plenty of law firms who and attorneys who offer to do will services for free, but too often police don't want to do that. They don't want to think about the reality of the job. And so, what I would really encourage is that police leaders, annually, they say, "This is what we're doing. We're bringing the attorneys, you're going to update or write your wills."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a great idea.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Greg also hadn't updated his insurance and benefits paperwork. Very thankfully, I have a great relationship with his family, but I have seen too many families that have acrimonious situations and that can lead to a lot of hardship, especially for children. So if it's things like that, that I think being really intentional on like, all right, I know you all don't want to do this, we're doing it. Maybe you can even make it fun, like bring in lunch or do something. But I think it is so important to make sure that paperwork is updated, they have an updated photo. So those are things that can be done proactively. In the aftermath, I think it is so important that if there are opportunities and people want to rally around, people do want to support, you need to get it set up as soon as possible to really maximize the impact for that family, especially if there are children involved.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you're talking about a funding campaign?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yes. Or either you establish, say donations can be sent to the police department here in his name, or you can go to this bank, whatever it is, people are going to want to give. I think setting it up front also prevents being people who take advantage of that situation and who may not be trustworthy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have you seen that?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yes. And so, that's one of the reasons why we are very honored also to support, is because our police departments know that we're a trusted source and that every single penny will go to that family.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Obviously it sounds morbid, which is why people don't want to do this, but I think that sounds fantastic. So proactively make sure that people's wills are in place, updated photographs and their beneficiaries are updated, and all that kind of types of paperwork. Is it even worth police departments thinking ahead to which organizations will do fundraising?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Have it established. So, if your department has a foundation, if that's the mechanism that you want to do, I would very strongly advocate that you have a tragedy response plan in place. Because at the time, I mean it's overwhelming, even if when it's just one officer. But you talk about how many situations have more than one officer that are involved, the amount of overwhelm and chaos and public relations, like media relations, helping your organization, helping the families, making it as easy as possible to know, all right, this is the game plan, I think really can go a long way for making sure that your officers and the family are prioritized.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And in a way, it's nice for them to know that these circumstances are in place. It's nothing worse than if you are critically injured, having to worry about all of this stuff as well.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yep, absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are the things you've seen departments do that you went, "Don't do that."

Kassy Alia Ray:

After a line of duty death?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Kassy Alia Ray:

I mean, I think one of the most detrimental things can be if the leader is absent. I've seen at times where a leader is just so overwhelmed and I can understand that, but that's a time that your agency needs you to show up. And so, being present, being engaged is critical. Dragging your feet and not being present would be the most important things that have been most negatively impactful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I almost feel like is there a space for training for police leaders to mitigate the need for this, should it ever come up?

Kassy Alia Ray:

I don't know if it needs to be extensive, but I think working through a plan and being mindful, we have plans for mass shooting incidences and other critical cases. I don't think it would take that heavy of a lift. It would just take the time and intentionality to make that plan happen.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tell me about the timeframe. So after Greg's death, you're going through these process, when did normality feel like it returned?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Oh my goodness. I don't know if, and there are all so many cliches when you've gone through a lot of grief. One of them is the new normal. I think that is true. I remember one day there's one of my favorite, it's a little coffee shop called The Gourmet Shop in Columbia. And I was having a really just a tough day. But what was tough about it is I was having this struggle, where on one hand I still very much felt the jagged pieces of the loss of Greg. But on the other hand, I was finding a lot of meaning and purpose, in what has now become Serve & Connect was finding love again. I've remarried.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Congratulations.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Today's actually my sixth wedding anniversary with my husband Mitch.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, thank you for spending it with me. Sorry, Mitch.

Kassy Alia Ray:

And now we have a three-year-old boy. So two beautiful little boys. But at the time, as that relationship was beginning to unfold, I felt really conflicted. How can I hold this deep weight of this pain and this loss, but then also be feeling this joy? It was almost like the joy was more intrusive than the pain.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Almost guilty about moving on in a little way, am I?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Maybe. And it's like, yeah, and in moving forward it's like, what do you let go in their, it is like less guilt and more like, does that mean I'm further away from him? I think it was in recognizing that you can hold those two things and they can be equally real. And it doesn't mean, you know, I can still always love and miss him, and I always will, and I can also have joy and happiness, and learning that balance was I think a recognition of a new normal.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For Sal and for kids.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is there a role in police departments for helping them manage? Because something they're going to manage and process that trauma in different ways, I guess. Are there things that departments and communities can do that can help in that regard, that people should think about?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yeah. Well, and every family is so different and every situation is unique. I will say that Concerns Of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.), the COPS organization does a tremendous amount of work. They have kids camps, spouses camps, siblings camps. They have tons of camps and retreats that they do, as well as National Police Week every year. For us, with Sal having been six months old, it has been a bit unique for me. He is now in the stage of really processing what the loss of his dad. I mean, it's always, Greg is very much actively a part of our life.

And even my husband Mitch, he says often that I have two husbands and Sal has two dads. But as Sal matures, he understands more and more what happened to his dad and is figuring out what that means for him, and his identity. And so, for me it's been very important and I've been very thankful for how our police department and the surrounding police departments have wrapped their arms around Sal. And having him involved in a very positive space around policing is important to me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In what way?

Kassy Alia Ray:

So he's been a part of the events community outreach that I've done now since he was a baby, but we also have just gone and visited at police departments. It's really being friends with police officers. I think that is really valuable. Most

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recently, this was really neat, if you look up a group called Law Enforcement Officers Weekend, I got a call about a year ago from this guy Austin Glickman, he's a New York police officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you could understand what he said?

Kassy Alia Ray:

I could. He's pretty hilarious. But he was like, "So I started this nonprofit," and I'm thinking we're going to collaborate.

I'm like, "Sure, how can I help?"

He was like, "We raised money to send families have fallen officers on vacations."

I'm like, "Awesome."

And he was like, "No, your family was nominated and we want to send you on vacation."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's lovely.

Kassy Alia Ray:

And I was like, what?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's great.

Kassy Alia Ray:

That's crazy. So we just recently came back from that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where did you go?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Well, the Bahamas.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's a vacation. That doesn't suck.

Kassy Alia Ray:

And for Sal, I mean he had many different forms of chocolate, but what was more important was the bonds that he made with the other fallen officers' families who were there. He got to connect with other fallen officers' families, but in a space of celebration. So acknowledging this loss and having that connection, but not all being about trauma and

sadness. And I think that's another lesson learned for how agencies can support families of fallen officers, is continuing to honor their life and legacy. Even nine years later, the fact that they still put up the ribbons on his sign on the street, it means a lot. The fact that they put his name on the memorial in town, that means a lot. The fact that we get Christmas flowers every year and know that he's not forgotten, that means a lot. It also means a lot to me that not everything is sad.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So you created Serve & Connect to start moving more into this space, or tell me what you do. It's like they do. Me English goods.

Kassy Alia Ray:

So we are a nonprofit, as a mission of fostering positive change through sustainable police and community relationships. Really at the heart and soul of it, I felt very deeply called to tackle the divisiveness between police and communities, this us versus them narrative. I just wasn't sure how to do it. I spent a lot of time deep listening, learning, researching, reading, listening to different podcasts, talking-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Shouldn't be listening to podcasts.

Kassy Alia Ray:

It's a terrible idea. But the most important things I did was really leaning into conversations with people who had very different perspectives from my own, really challenging myself to understand what is the root cause of this divisiveness and distrust. I was also dealing with the case involving Greg's death and I could not think about the person who took his life without feeling so much hate in my heart. And I really struggled. I was trying so hard to move forward in my life and every time I had to confront the issues of the case, it was like I was being sucked down.

And I really struggled to know how I'd be in that courtroom and face him, and be the mother I wanted to be to our son, and teach him about love and compassion, and forgiveness when I was struggling so much. And so, I remember one time leaving the solicitor's office. Up to that point, I felt like I'd been really leaning on what would Greg want, what would Greg say? And that day I didn't have an answer. What really impacted me was imagining how I would feel if I were the mother of the man who killed Greg. And I realized that I didn't know his story, but I knew that there were too many things in our world that could have led him to be in that place on that day. And so, that's when I came to see how intertwined our stories were. And what I asked, and I said this at the sentencing, was what if we had found him before that day?

Would we have found someone in need? And what if we could have helped him? And that's really where I saw that at the end of the day, what police and communities want is more the same than it is different. Our communities to be safe, the people we love to be protected and our children to thrive. And so, the path forward is to really promote more collaboration, partnership and unity between police and communities, which at the very heart and soul is what community policing is supposed to be. If you look at the actual definition, it is about partnerships that can lead to

building trust, but also shared problem solving. And so, you talk about implementation science for me, is like how can we really help with the translation of this practice that we know works, but doesn't get implemented well in the real world? And if we can help to really enhance the capacity for more effective community policing, I believe that creates a pathway for bringing more people together.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I think you're actually recited a very, what I would consider accurate description of what community policing is largely perceived to be. I think one of the challenges often that I say if you get 10 police chiefs in a room and you ask them how to define community policing, you'll get 11 different answers, because by the time the last one spoke and the first one's changed his mind. And so, we have the challenges, it can be just too many people, whatever they want it to be, and they often redefine it to be something that's easier for them to do. But what you've actually described as something that's harder to do and implement well.

Kassy Alia Ray:

On one hand you'll get people who think it's like the sticker cop or the ice cream cop, someone who just thinks it's about walking the beat. Agencies who raise their hand when I ask if they do community policing and they do coffee with a cop or they do national net out once a year, there are some who think on a more extreme end that it's about being too soft on crime. Community members who also can critique it, saying, "I don't want the ice cream. I want you to stop shooting my people."

At a more extreme example. All those practices that I define, coffee with a cop, national night out, handing out ice cream cones, handing out stickers, those are all great, especially when done as part of a comprehensive culture that's embedded within a police department, where it's really about how do we build real authentic relationships with our community and work together to address those factors that contribute to crime in the first place. That's what community policing is supposed to be about. It is a culture that is embedded within a department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you find working in that role? I'm really interested in the implementation side, because as a researcher we run into the same problem. You're going to come into an organization that's going to be people who really get research and want research, and other people think it's just academic bullshit. And you know both sides, because your PhD training is in this area too.

Kassy Alia Ray:

So the first thing I'll say is I came across a study by a sociologist named Damon Centola, and he was looking at the process for driving social and systems change. In this day and age, when we think about things going viral, I mean we think like, "Oh, if Oprah could just tweet my message, then everyone would understand."

And that may work if you're trying to sell something very simple or basic, but even if you dive deeper, the fact when it gets to someone at that influential level, it's because there are repetition of a message over and over and over again.

And that's really just a tipping point once it reaches that really high point. And so, what Damon Centola found that after about a 25% engagement of a population, you can see a tipping point for a deeper level of cultural or social change.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's really interesting, because here at the conference there's an organization I'm very fond of called 30 by 30.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Mm-hmm.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You may be familiar with them. Yeah. They're trying to see if they can achieve the US by 2030, a representation of about 30% of police officers being women. Because right now it's not even scraping up to 14%. And I once said to Mo McGough, one of the founders, "Why aren't you shooting for 50%?"

She said, "Because about 30%, around there is, that's that tipping point where you start to see a kind of cultural organizational shift." So 25 to 30% makes sense. Yeah.

Kassy Alia Ray:

When you talk about shifting a culture and really enhancing the use of more effective community policing, that's a principle I've really leaned on, is if we can work with more agencies that are eager and excited to learn, then by creating that network, I believe that we can create a stimulus for change. And we are seeing that throughout South Carolina, I believe. And so, the ways that we do that tangibly with Serve & Connect first and foremost, our key stakeholder who we love so much are our police officers. That's why we got started. We work a lot with community partners, but first and foremost, just like Greg said, for every one negative story you hear, that there are thousands of positive stories happening every day that go unnoticed. I very deeply believe that by and large police officers got into this profession, because they were called to help.

And what we found in a survey back in 2017 with police officers throughout South Carolina was that while 94% reported that they felt that they could help someone, they could make an impact on their community. And 93% said that community policing was important to them. Only 29% felt that they had access to the resources they needed to help someone when they encountered them in need. And so, through our program such as Greg's Groceries, that's one of our signature programs, it's where we pack boxes of non-perishable food. They're intended to feed a family of four, pretty sizable boxes. Those are packed by police alongside community members. And then, those boxes of food go back with agencies. So if they go on a call and come across someone in need, they're able to help. They can use it for strategic community outreach at events to build trust and relationships, and reach hard to reach populations. They can do it through referrals.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's fascinating that so many officers are finding that the rest of the system isn't able to help the people they're coming across. And that's increasingly becoming clear with the work that's being done when social workers are being

paired with police officers in co-responder models. My own research, but also I know from colleagues is finding that the co-responder models are working well, but then they're referring people into the city systems and the city systems are failing people. Again, we're at that limit of what policing can do, which is can't fill in the gaps for a failure of other city and county services. That seems to be a struggle.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Well, that is very true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not to negate the program, I think it's great, but I think interesting that it's a response to a problem that we're starting to see in a lot of places.

Kassy Alia Ray:

What we see as crime and violence is driven by issues that exist within our communities. Issues related to poverty and housing and hunger.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just lack of mental health support for the community at large, yeah.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yeah, 100%. And police are really the front line to people who are in crisis. Those boxes of food, while it's not going to end food insecurity, what it does do is open the door for conversation. And so, I've heard from numerous officers that prior to those boxes of food, they would be more tentative about asking more questions and more follow up, because they would feel like, "Well, if I don't have access to resources to help, how far do I want to go in this questioning?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. You can't promise things you don't have.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yeah, absolutely. But knowing that at a minimum they have this box of food helps to open the door for a conversation. And one example I really love, there was an officer in Columbia who came across a car that was pulled over in the median. The woman wouldn't even look at him. Her car had broken down, I believe, but he could tell it seemed like some sort of abuse. Like, she looked not in a good place and you could tell that there were groceries on her seat that seemed to be spoiling.

And so, he remembered the box of Greg's Groceries, went to his car to get it. And when he brought it to her, he said that that was the first time she smiled in the entire interaction. Opened the door for a conversation, where she said that she came home from grocery shopping to a very abusive situation, didn't even have time to unload them, just got right in the car and left, was sleeping in her car overnight, because she had nowhere to go. And so, because of that box of food, it led open to a conversation around how do we get this woman help?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Fantastic. Fantastic.

Kassy Alia Ray:

And so, to your point, you still need to connect with the other resources, but through this, it also helps us in opening a dialogue with our partners.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What are the key implementation components if police organizations want to make a substantial shift in the direction of more or this level of community engagement, what are the keys that they have to do, or pitfalls to avoid?

Kassy Alia Ray:

For any agency, while there are some common patterns that we can see, I think doing an assessment of where do you stand?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And where do you want to be?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yeah, I wish there was this magic plan, but it's really just about, and isn't this at the core of it, what implementation science is? It's like, what is the systematic plan and how do we evaluate to know if we're succeeding at that goal to translate the thing that we already know should be able to work?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that's difficult for some organizations to actually ask themselves, "Where am I not doing well in this?"

Kassy Alia Ray:

People are very scared of evaluation and very scared to take that critical look in the mirror. So one of our other programs is called COMPASS, and it's the framework that we use to help support the development of locally driven movements, whether it be violent crime reduction, mental health. We also have one that's focused on relationships with Hispanic.

An exercise that we do through that is called the Community Transformation Map. All the partners, police, community organizations, people with lived experience, we come to the table and they go through a series of questions that ask, as a group, where are we at being able to measure change? Where are we at when it comes to trusting one another? Where are we at with our vision setting?

And at first they can be really nervous about hurting people's feelings or not wanting to rate themselves. People think, "I need to rate myself highly, it will make us look better."

But when it got to some questions that, where they may have rated themselves lower, I was like, "This is what we need." So I definitely would encourage people not to be afraid of measurement and evaluation. It's such an empowering tool.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's the only way to know if you're actually making progress.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Absolutely. Our big opportunity is creating a path and supporting that empowerment that's already within, and just creating tools and support that can really magnify what police got into this in the first place for. So I'm really excited about that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And as you say, there are so many good things taking place that we don't see. I'm going to steal a line from a friend of mine, Peter Moskos, which is, "Good policing is boring, and so you never see it." But we need to encourage more of the boring policing, don't we?

Kassy Alia Ray:

And I think it's also in how we share stories too. I mean, the things that we gravitate toward. We all like to blame the media, but the media share stories that we share and that we watch. And so, I do think part of it is incumbent on us to listen to the good stories.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, it's a good try, but I'm still going to blame the media. If people want to get in contact, how do they find you?

Kassy Alia Ray:

Yeah, check us out on our website, serveandconnect.org, or on Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Fantastic. Well, I mean, wouldn't obviously wish your experiences on anybody, but I just think it's fantastic that you've managed to turn it into this, turn around to this great positive.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Thank you so much.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that's absolutely wonderful. Thanks very much for spending some time with me.

Kassy Alia Ray:

Oh, thank you so much. This was a lot of fun.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 79 of Reducing Crime, recorded in Boston, October 2024.

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Be safe and best of luck.