

#33 (TANYA MEISENHOLDER)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe here with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. Tanya Meisenholder is the deputy commissioner of equity and inclusion for the New York City Police Department. We talk about hiring and retaining a diverse workforce, engaging underrepresented groups within the police service, and what she learned about being black and blue in a post George Floyd world.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hello again, folks. The guest theme for the previous episode was Cagney & Lacey, a pioneering 1980s buddy cop show they had the first all-female leads for a police show on network television. For this month, the guest theme was, well, I'm not sure a classic police show, but it is damn funny. This comedy first debuted in 2013. And the eighth and the last final season will be released towards the end of the year. It was to be released earlier, but it is apparently being rewritten in response to the killing of George Floyd. The seven seasons to date have subtly woven in many of the themes and challenges of contemporary policing with a diverse workforce that we touch on in this episode. So it'll be interesting to see how the writers handle the last season.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

My guest is Tanya Meisenholder, the Deputy Commissioner of Equity and Inclusion for the New York City Police Department. Prior to joining the NYPD in 2007, she worked with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. And I think these days, they throw in 'Explosives' at the end for good measure. And the New York, New Jersey HIDTA, that is the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. She's also worked with police departments in Birmingham, Alabama, and in New York State with the cities of Schenectady, Albany, and Troy. Her NYPD career has included stints in intelligence and analysis, project management, risk management, policy development, strategic planning, and research and evaluation. She has a PhD in criminal justice from the University of New York at Albany. We caught up in her office on the 11th floor of 1 Police Plaza, right in the heart of Gotham itself.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've never done anything live?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Not a podcast.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Live radio or something like that?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yeah. Like NPR. Stuff like that, but good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's stressful, right?

Tanya Meisenholder:

It's not stressful doing it. It's stressful. And when you think about do I actually sound like a reasonable human being on the other end of it?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I also think that it's weird coming doing podcast interviews with people and kind of saying, "Here, come and speak to me and do something that's really unusual you've not done before." And I think live radio is probably the closest approximation of it. But I can imagine it's also weird because you have an interesting topic area as well. What is your official title anyway?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Deputy Commissioner of Equity and Inclusion.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Deputy Commissioner of Equity and Inclusion. And what the hell does that actually mean?

Tanya Meisenholder:

So equity is about fairness, and inclusion is about creating a sense of belonging.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that within the NYPD, or is that for how the NYPD behaves externally to people outside the organization?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Both. So when I think about equity and inclusion, I think about the internal aspects of it in our employees. But then I consider the impact that it has on the communities we serve. So if we don't treat our employees well on the inside, then how do we expect them to treat others on the outside?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go using all of these kinds of sensible principles. You're never going to get anywhere in policing with that.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I'm a civilian.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But I mean, you've been in and around policing for a while. Haven't you?

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. So I've been in policing for well over 20 years. Started in Birmingham, Alabama as an intern. Worked some with the Birmingham, Alabama Police Department, and then spent several years upstate in Albany, Schenectady, and Troy Police Departments before I joined the NYPD about 14 years ago.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What were you doing upstate?

Tanya Meisenholder:

I was a crime analyst. I was working on my PhD in criminal justice. I'm from the South, and I thought that the North was an awful place, and didn't think that I would stay there. But I engaged in my academic pursuits there. Soon realized that I was not going into academia.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sensible move.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I was much better suited for policing. I met a guy, he became an NYPD cop. I followed suit. And I've been here for about 14 years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been a civilian in policing for about 14 years?

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Crime analyst. What an unsung, underpaid job that I think is so crucial to policing in the 21st century.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I was the first crime analyst in Schenectady, New York Police Department. And I worked for an incredible chief who embraced the work that I was doing, which at that time was very basic. Like how do we display calls for service on a graph? And then didn't even touch how do we use this in terms of tactics and strategies? I do think it is an underutilized resource in law enforcement more generally. It's really complicated in the NYPD where we have so many precincts and different ways of thinking about crime analysis,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But you also have really different communities here.

Tanya Meisenholder:

We do. Very diverse communities, every precinct is different, and there's communities within communities. And then beyond patrol precincts, we also have housing commands, transit commands. And how we police those broadly is very different. And then how we analyze crime in those areas is different.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Given that there are such diverse communities across the city. I mean the size and scope of the NYPD I think is unfathomable to most people in policing. This is one of the first offices of its kind in any police department, right?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yes. As far as I'm aware, it is the first office in a law enforcement setting. So we were established in 2018. And it's really an evolution of our Equal Employment Opportunity office. But thinking about how do we drive issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion forward.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I think it's important to send a signal that the status of an office with real structure, and personnel, and attention to policy and practice is really, I think it's really great in the 21st century. We should've been doing this a long time before. But we're getting there, right?

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. And I can say that since we've been established, we've received requests from several other police departments who are interested in establishing offices or at least personnel assigned to offices around equity and inclusion. So in many ways, the NYPD leads the way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When they contact you. What do you tell them? I mean, what are the benefits in setting up an office of this kind within an organization?

Tanya Meisenholder:

We talk to them first about how this office is organized. And I think it's important to note that we are very much internally focused, whereas we have other bureaus that focus on the external aspects related to equity and inclusion. So we make that very clear. We talk to them about what our structure is like, where our focus areas are, and where the challenges are. And driving change forward, especially cultural change, for something that sounds very philosophical.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I mean, I can imagine some kind of knuckle draggers with 30 years in the job, probably it sounds a little bit warm and fuzzy, right?

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Tanya Meisenholder:

We have some employees who very much understand what we do, why we do it, why it's important. And then we have resistors who want nothing to do with it and don't understand why we have an office like this in the NYPD.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well Jack Maple, who's a famed detective from this very police department once wrote that 10% of the department at any time is actively seeking to undermine any good thing that you want to try and do.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I would raise it above 10% if I was asked that question.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It probably increases dramatically based on how new and innovative or just different each initiative is. Right?

Tanya Meisenholder:

For sure. And then if you think about generational issues as you indicated, or gender issues when you talk about creating a safe space where employees feel like they belong, that doesn't necessarily resonate with the police officer on the street who's responding to calls for service on a daily basis.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I mean, you've got people who get out into the districts, get out into the precincts. And that's where they spend their career.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I wonder sometimes if they're a little oblivious to see the change in the new police officers that are coming on board. Because it's a very different generation.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I couldn't agree more. I think the folks that are coming in now have different values, different motivations, different desires from what they expect a career in law enforcement. And I think it's a challenge for those that have been around for a long time to recognize that and to think about what that means and why it's important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it used to be a badge of honor, didn't it? Once you have double digit years, you got 10, 15 years in. It's fairly standard to say, "Well, this is shit. But it's always been that way. And this is what you've got to put up with."

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But what you're actually trying to do is to kind of create the organization that's more supportive, especially I'm guessing for younger officers -

Tanya Meisenholder:

... for younger officers, for women, for the LGBTQ employees. Any number of people who are coming on this job with different perspectives, different life experiences, and want different things from the job. There is resistance from people that have been around for some time. And dealing with that is complicated. And sometimes, you just have to go around those folks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. That's a hard one though. Isn't it? Because you're never going to bring everybody with you. And that must be particularly difficult for anybody that stands out because it's such a cultural job. It's such a teamwork oriented job for somebody stands out and a little bit different. It must be really challenging to work in a big organizational environment.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yeah, it is. And think about as a young officer, what it's like to speak up or stand up to someone that has been around for a long time that knows far more than they do about policing. When they see something, when they hear something that doesn't sound quite right to them, or doesn't sit well with them. So there is a power dynamic that you are really working against at all times in the organization.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that can manifest in two ways. Because you can have people at the same rank as you, but they hold status within the organization for being at what we used to call an old sweat, been around a bit. But then it also can manifest itself as people who have rank as well. And people don't leave jobs because the job's awful. People leave jobs because the boss is awful.

Tanya Meisenholder:

But in law enforcement, it's not always so easy to leave.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, that's right. Yeah. Even in big organizations.

Tanya Meisenholder:

We know that we lose about 50% of any recruit class by the time they have 10 years on. And for those that stay past 10 years, when you really think about who are we retaining for how long. And that's part of the work that we do in equity and inclusion is think about that. For instance, our black males leaving at a higher rate than their white counterparts.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's got to be hugely concerning.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It is concerning. It's difficult enough to recruit and hire certain demographics into the organization. And it's even more challenging at times to keep them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can see the challenges in multiple ways. First of all, there's just a huge investment in those people. But secondly, given the nature of policing in urban environments, especially big East Coast cities like Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and New York, those are the very officers that send such a great signal to the community about inclusion, about employment, about role models in the community. And to be losing those at a faster rate, that just must be a horrible challenge to try and address.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It is very challenging. And I think one of the questions that you have to raise is are they institutionalized into the policing culture? So we've had a number of losses this year, both in terms of deaths due to COVID. And we've had many, many officers retire from policing. So our numbers are way up.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In terms of separating, in terms of leaving the department?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yep. And that's due to the climate that we're in, that's due to the fiscal crisis that we're in. And for some, it's due to changes in policing that they don't necessarily agree with.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. You kind of have to admire anybody that signs on the line and walks into a recruiting office to join policing at the moment.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yeah. It's tough. So thinking about how do we reach some of these people that are not interested in a career in law enforcement. So you have people that are interested, you have people that are aware of the opportunities. And then you have those that are qualified. And we know right now we've always struggled with black males in particular. With females, especially Asian females. How are we going to get them in to take the test?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are there processes you can put in place to actually help these underrepresented groups with the process of just getting into the department?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yeah. One of the things that we're working on here, we refer to as barriers. So one of the core missions in OEI is to really think about how we identify and address barriers throughout the entire employee life cycle. So from recruitment,

what's preventing someone from even applying to take the job? And then what is preventing them from moving throughout the hiring process?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you have any examples?

Tanya Meisenholder:

So the psychological exam, for instance.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I certainly couldn't pass that these days!

Tanya Meisenholder:

Well, I couldn't either. [laughs] So we know that certain groups fail the psych [test] at a different rate than others. We also know that certain groups get through the background check at a different rate than others. So really looking at all of that and thinking about what's happening and why, and what can we do to change in order to make it easier for people to join the department.

So for instance, years ago, you would not have been able to join the NYPD if you had a background with marijuana use. It's not the case today. And that has an impact on any number of people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That all sounds reasonable for obvious groups, people of color, that it's acceptable in America and society to retain that kind of demographic information. But what do you do about finding ways to support and to encourage the participation of the LGBTQI+ community?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Right, that's a great question. And I think in terms of demographic data on our employees, it's really important to think about the demographic data going back historically for a really long time. For instance, right now, I know that our most recent recruit class was 24% female. But I also know that we've only moved the needle on females from 15% to 19% in the overall representation over the past 20 years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well if there's any consolation, moving to 19% puts you ahead of just about every state police in the country.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It does. So we have the basic information. Race, gender, age. But what you're asking about is how do we collect that information that's not reported in your average census document?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And it's kind of that merging of gender and sexual orientation and that whole area, isn't it?

Tanya Meisenholder:

So intersectionality, right? The merging of all of your different identities. Some are compliance issues. So for instance this year, we recently updated our personnel system to collect information on gender identity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do people feel about being asked about that?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Right now, we're asking new employees. So people that are coming onto the job. I have heard no negative accounts of anyone being asked that question. Our employees that are more tenured have the option to self-report that information in the new personnel system, which will be online soon.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And the reason I ask is that we can't address problems if we don't have data on the nature of the problem. But NYPD are a relatively progressive organization. You have an Office of Equity and Inclusion that we're sitting in right now. But I just wonder about some of the, how do I put this politely, less progressive police departments and Sheriffs offices that are out there, how comfortable people would be about volunteering information that is very personal in that regard.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I don't think they'd be comfortable at all. We have a Gay Officers Action League, which is very active. We do a lot of work with them in our office. And one of the things that they continuously raise is the lack of data on LGBTQ employees.

Tanya Meisenholder:

You also have to remember that you have some that are out and others that are not, and don't want to be. So that's an individual issue that you have to reconcile. In 2019, we did the first ever employee survey on LGBTQ, voluntary of course to-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That must have been fascinating.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It was fascinating. It was one, just to see how many people actually responded. The reaction to some folks that we did it. And to your point, some people reacted very poorly because there are many people that still do not agree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But that's a data point.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It is a data point.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's not a positive one. It's not a good one, but it's a data point.

Tanya Meisenholder:

But what we're moving to is to collect sexual orientation data in our personnel database. So we have vetted the fields and we will make that as a self-report option in the upcoming months. I do believe that we will absolutely be the first law enforcement agency to collect self-reported information on sexual orientation. I think the challenge will be is that you will get a number of people in the LGBTQIA+ community who will provide this data. And then you will have a lot of others who will not answer the question.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. It's almost a catch 22 situation. Because to feel comfortable answering those kinds of questions, you have to create an inclusive office. So if you don't have an inclusive office, you don't get the information. But that's probably the reason that a lot of people might be leaving.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yeah. And it's very difficult for people to reconcile that. At the end of the day, I think what an officer is thinking when he's out on the street with someone who doesn't think or act like they do is what does it mean for me in this moment? And the moment you don't necessarily care that this person is gay, or bisexual, or whatever the case may be. But when you go back to the command, you might think about it a different way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. And that's an interesting way to frame this because there is a sense with most officers, I think fortunately, and I'm very grateful for it. Is the sense of overwhelming professionalism. I'm working with officers right now in Philadelphia, in a high drug trafficking drug area, people with a lot of problems. And the officers are dealing with people in a very professional manner. And yet privately, they may say, "I could never be like this. How do people let themselves be like this?" But when you actually see them interacting with the public, they have a professional demeanor that I understand and respect. But outside of that, and you come away from it. And of course that's where you're going to start having some personnel issues.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. This year we did employee forums on race and law enforcement. So after the death of George Floyd, we sent an open letter to our employees inviting them to take part in these discussions. Very difficult, very candid discussions that brought up any number of issues around race and policing. But one of the things that was raised is exactly what you're talking about. You have for example, a black cop and a white cop in the car together. And you're policing in a certain neighborhood. And the white cop makes a comment about the people in that neighborhood. And the black cop doesn't say anything. But he's thinking, wait a minute, "I look just like that person." So how do you reconcile that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And the white cop can get out of the car and deal with members of the public perfectly professionally, and think that that's enough and that's okay. Get back in the car, and start to create a workplace environment that's not as supportive as it could be.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Absolutely. So we see that. And that type of work is critically important. And it's really important to change the culture and to get people to think differently about some of the challenges that we face internally in terms of how we treat each [other]. But as importantly, externally with the communities that we work in.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I think the internal stuff is really, really important. Because if you can create a supportive workplace internally, you can put up with all sorts of shit externally. Because you have that sense of a cohesive organization where there's space for everybody to participate and be part of the team.

Tanya Meisenholder:

But it starts from within. And if you don't recognize that, then shame on you. Because how we treat each other is just so critically important, and that power dynamic is huge.

The NYP has over 50,000 employees. 35,000 sworn, about 18,000 right now that are civilians. And there is a difference in policing and how we treat and think about our civilian employees and our uniform employees. And those dynamics play out daily.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's something crime analysts have particularly experienced over the years because they're often dealing with decision-makers and frontline officers. So instead of just being a distant personnel, I don't want to denigrate in any way, shape, or form people who do personnel and payroll, especially if anybody's in Baltimore struggling to get their pay right now. But you've got some civilian staff who work really closely with the police. And I know that over the years, it's always been a long running issue just talking to crime analysts about how they felt that it's been challenging in that kind of environment. And you've been there.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Absolutely. I was there for many years. And I have a great deal of appreciation for the work that crime analysts do. But in a precinct, a crime analyst is a civilian with no rank who is reporting most often to a sergeant. And each of those units is going to act very differently based on the dynamic of that particular precinct. And whether their input is valued, how it is received, how much they're able to contribute, how they're engaged, are they included is all very much affected by people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just giving people a seat at the big table is a huge step.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. When we talk about diversity first, we often talk about it in terms of race and gender. Which is fine, that's important. But then you think about all of the other ways that we differ in terms of sexual orientation. Religion, life experience, everything that goes into the diversity. But a lot of the diversity in the NYPD is in the lower ranks. So when you look up-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It starts to become a bit pale, male, and stale, does it?

Tanya Meisenholder:

It does. And I've said this to the police commissioner. While we may be a diverse organization, we have a long way to go in terms of being an inclusive organization.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So if you think about the rank structure in policing and how you kind of slowly climb that greasy pole. If there was a lack of diversity 20, 30 years ago, that's going to manifest itself now in the top of the organization?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that the officers you have who've got five-year service or less are going to be hopefully reflective of the leadership in 20, 25 years' time. But what you're looking at is a leadership that reflected what the organization looked like decades-

Tanya Meisenholder:

It's important to think about, often don't think about the long game though. Right? So last year, did some work with a captain here. Captain [inaudible 00:24:05], fabulous. In thinking about women in policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's in a dire state in the United States. And I just don't know why people don't see this.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I don't think they recognize what females bring to the table that's different than males. What we did here internally is we surveyed female sergeants and said, "Why aren't you taking the lieutenant exam?" Because if we can't get the female sergeants to take the lieutenant exam, then they can't become captains. They can't move up if they're not there to begin with.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Anything in particular strike you?

Tanya Meisenholder:

A lot of it was work-life balance.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This job takes a toll.

Tanya Meisenholder:

This job takes a toll. And once you are motivated by certain things, then having the ability to have that balance is very important for females.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm guessing one of the areas here, but it's reflective of a broader societal expectation that more child-rearing for example is dumped onto the, dumped, there's me no kids. Is dumped onto women.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Absolutely. We're a microcosm of society, and that's reflected in many ways. But we're doing a review of our patrol guide right now. Right? So I sent an email to someone and I said, "Why is it in our patrol guide procedure for lost children that the child must stay with a female uniformed member of the service?" It's patriarchy at its finest. Right? And some people are aghast and then others are like, "Well, who else is going to watch them?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The very temerity that you would even ask that question. But what does it say about how we think about women's role in the workplace?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yes. And I think that we're doing a lot here to think about that. And we talk about issues in policing that affect women. How do you reconcile work life balance? What does it mean if you're pregnant on the job? What are the implications for you? Emotional wellbeing. Any number of things that affect employees generally, but maybe very specific to women.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the things that have come out of that? I mean, what are the lessons for other departments?

Tanya Meisenholder:

What it's done, it's created a networking and a mentoring opportunity for women to come together to know that they're not alone, to have an opportunity to talk through issues, to figure out ways to problem solve about issues that affect women in policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Mentoring outside of your own organizational structure, with all the inherent problems of rank and just the workplace dynamics itself. I think that's an underappreciated benefit of thinking how to help people navigate through a policing career.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It certainly affects underrepresented groups. In particular ways, the NYPD has made various attempts at mentoring over the years. And we have field training program, which some would consider mentoring. I do not. We have other programs. But to me, they're primarily orientations. So if you look over here on my board, you'll see that mentoring is number three as we in the agency-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can just about make that out. You have a medical doctor's handwriting, but I get the gist of it.

Tanya Meisenholder:

We are, absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You could call that whatever you want to call it.

Tanya Meisenholder:

We're thinking about that. And we're thinking about how to provide mentoring skills to more of our employees. Because navigating the NYPD or any organization really can be really challenging. And there is that part of the organization where it's not what you know, but it's who you know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Yeah, it's never something I've ever had to worry about because being a white male, I've never had to worry about looking around the organization, struggling to find somebody who looks like me. Can't find anybody that thinks like me. And that's probably a good thing. But they certainly all look like me.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It will become a little bit more challenging for you. And then I think broadly in terms of the national landscape, we're doing some work on 30 by '30, which is the idea of increasing the representation of women to 30% by 2030.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's the work that Mo McGough started when she was at the National Police Foundation and now with The Policing Project.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right, phenomenal.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Mo's been a guest on the podcast previously.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I listened to her. I thought she was great. I continue to think the work she does is critically important and going to do my best to ensure that the NYPD signs up for that pledge and helps to move that work forward.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think getting to 30% of the sworn workforce being women is attainable?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Yes, I do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that's where we should stop? Because I was wondering why it wasn't 50%, which is where places like New Zealand are reaching for now.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I think we should continue to drive forward and increase it as high as we can go. Women bring so much to policing. When you think about the academic research and the differences in de-escalation and use of force. I think that that is underestimated and undervalued. Can we get there? We can in the NYPD. Can you do it in other places? Some agencies don't have female officers at all right now, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is just astounding, isn't it? It's 2021 people. Get with the program for crying out loud.

Tanya Meisenholder:

We're at 19% of our sworn. We have much more on the civilian side. But our most recent recruit class was 24%. But when we talked about barriers earlier, you have to think about not only what it takes to hire them. But are they getting through the academy at the same rate as their male counterparts? Are they getting promoted? Are they taking advantage of civil service exams? Are they moving throughout the organization?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I'm always astounded when I hear and learn of organizations that don't analyze it and not even collecting that kind of information. They just don't think it's relevant. As long as they have a class, they're fine.

Tanya Meisenholder:

I understand the fiscal issues, the technical issues, the capacity issues, if you will, that some agencies might have in collecting that information. I cannot reconcile that agencies don't want to collect as much information as possible on any number of factors, including their employee demographics.

Tanya Meisenholder:

In 2020, we started to post our employee demographics online for the first time. And transparency is something that we're very much committed to. And if we don't currently collect it, we had to think about how can we collect it. But the challenge with that is when you think about collecting particular pieces of information around religion or sexual orientation, how do you do that in a way that's practical for the organization and fair to the employees?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where is the level at which point the organization is capable of reflecting the diversity of the community, but also down to what kind of level? Are we down to the stage where we're starting to worry about the demographic structure of all the officers at each precincts matching the demographics of the people who live in those precincts? What kind of organizational level do you go, "We need some flexibility here"?

Tanya Meisenholder:

So right now, we're in the midst of police reform like many agencies.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It feels like we've been in the midst of police reform since about 1993.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. In New York specifically, we are under executive order 203. Governor Cuomo's order to reform and re-imagine policing. And we've held a number of sessions where we've invited people to provide input to the department on how they think policing should change. And one of the primary items that has been raised over and over again is the idea that the police officers should be more reflective of the people in the communities that we serve.

Tanya Meisenholder:

So the question that I always ask when that comes up is what is it that people actually want? Do they want someone that looks like them because they believe they will understand them more and can relate to them more? Or do they just want to be treated with respect and professionalism?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. Do I need to look like you to understand where you are and to treat you with respect and relate to you?

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. And in policing as you well know, there is at times an us versus them dynamic that plays out in powerful ways when you have so much power over others.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that can cross racial boundaries.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It absolutely does. Policing shouldn't be something that we do to people. It should be something that we do with people. In the NYPD, I can say that by law, we are not allowed to place individuals in any command for any reason beyond language. So even if I wanted to say I want to make sure that there's X percentage of Y people in a particular precinct, legally, I'm not able to do that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's really interesting. So those legal protections support staff in some regards, but hinder their capacity in other regards to be able to work in districts that are reflective of the people that are around there. That's incredibly challenging.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It is. And we got sued many years ago when we made the decision to place a large group of black males in a particular command. And we lost.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I can understand the lawsuit. Because it's a horribly challenging situation because where you are posted to, where you are assigned to can have huge career implications for you.

Tanya Meisenholder:

And think about it. The NYPD right now, 15.4% black, right? Even if we wanted to try and match the demographics of our employees to the demographics of all of our commands, we can't. It's really complicated. That's not the same-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well you balance one thing, you might lose another. So you can improve in terms of people of color, but then you might lose out more in terms of LGBTQIA+ community members. And that's a factor as well, right?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Right. And most of the times, we don't even know who some of those employees are unless they tell us. So I think I understand the discussion around having the police department be reflective of the particular community. And I support it, but I think it's very complex and nuanced. And for me, what I want to understand more is the root cause or reason in what people are actually asking for.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's 2021. We don't do complex and nuance. We do simplistic and uninformed. That's how we tend to do things nowadays. I'm interested to learn a little bit more about the forums that you had after George Floyd. Because I can imagine that was really challenging. Did you get much engagement?

Tanya Meisenholder:

It was received differently by employees. I think when the initial invitation went out, there was a lot of surprise and skepticism about what the agency was doing and why we were having these forums on race and law enforcement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Every precinct's got their conspiracy theorists that love to spread the underlying what's going on. Because they found out on the website that it doesn't, yeah, some way.

Tanya Meisenholder:

The NYPD certainly has its skeptics and conspiracy theorists, just like-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The rumor mill.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Anywhere else. So we had hundreds of employees. We had over 40 forums where we brought people together and had really challenging discussions around race. And a number of things came up in terms of the conflict that some of our employees feel as a person of color. And as-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Understandably.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Absolutely. And as a police officer. And their words, not mine. But the idea of being black and being blue, and what that means. And we talked a lot about their personal experiences, and what it's like to be in uniform as a black male with a cop. And then walking around in your neighborhood at night in sweat pants with a firearm. And the differences that that entails. It was very much a learning moment for many of the people that took part.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was there anything that came out of it that really surprised?

Tanya Meisenholder:

No. It wasn't surprising, but it was heartbreaking at times to hear some of the stories and some of the experiences that our own employees have had.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Speaking to a few black cops going around on the field work that I've been doing, it seems that post George Floyd, they had to deal with a lot more at home after work.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Absolutely. We heard of people losing friendships, of people losing family members. Where others that were not law enforcement could not reconcile how an individual person could stay in this career and be a cop. I think that was really, really hard for many of our employees. I think it caused challenges within the agency among our employees who felt a certain way. And then when you bring politics into the mix and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's just everything nowadays, isn't it? Everything is politics.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. Recent presidential election. Then that caused a lot of divisiveness and conflict within the agency as well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

2020 was just basically a horrible year.

Tanya Meisenholder:

It was a challenging year to say the least.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Has policing dealt with that, with its history?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Not very well. I think some agencies have made various attempts. And that could be by making statements about acknowledging the history that law enforcement has played. There are certainly agencies who have not necessarily history, but are doing stuff to make strides. So for instance, a number that have signed up for implicit bias training, ourself included. For the NYPD, one of the things that has come out of the race forums is that we are creating a curriculum for our recruits that really goes deep into the history of policing and provides explanations to our newest members about why some people in the community feel the way they do, and what it's going to mean for them as they walk out the door.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's the key part, right? What it means for them. In other words, how they're going to have to think about when they interact with the public and some of the communities that we have.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. If you haven't had your own life experience or you're not close to someone that has, then it's very difficult to understand why that's important to someone else.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If I'm in a police department that's not really thought about this probably as much as I should, where to start? Where would you start?

Tanya Meisenholder:

Start talking to people. Listen more, talk less. Diversity, equity, and inclusion is very nuanced, very complicated. And there are folks that can really talk to you about what it means, what it means for your agency, and how to drive change forward. But you need to start having those conversations. Equity is about fairness. Are your policies fair? Are they treating women differently than they're treating other groups?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know there's been a lot of issues around physical fitness tests for entrance.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Physical fitness test. I think that's a really important part. And I know there's a lot of work that's been done on that with several women in the field.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

People like Ivonne Roman working in it, for example.

Tanya Meisenholder:

So what we do in the agency is we go to survey each of our recruits when they decide to leave the academy. We certainly know that women fail the physical at a higher rate than men. And what should we do about that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I also think that there's a more fundamental issue, which is policing has never yet really come to grips with how physical a job is it.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Out of all of our standards, what I'd like to think about is how often have you actually run that far or climbed that fence? And I'm not the right person to ask, but someone should be asking those questions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was a cadet. Most people could get away from me. But if they ran across an obstacle course or an assault course, I've got them.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right. But in the NYPD, you pass these physical standards test when you come in and then never again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I think that what's interesting is that you've embraced these forums, which is something a lot of agencies haven't done. And I think some of them are just scared to open that box to see what comes out. But it doesn't mean just because you have the forums, that people are going to rush to leave the organizations. But it's the right step in terms of keeping them rather than just kind of ignoring the issues.

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Tanya Meisenholder:

For me right now, it's having listened, having learned, as I learn every day. You have to get very comfortable being uncomfortable as a middle-aged white woman. And I think it's where is the agency going as a result of these forums in this internal engagement, in terms of all of the external engagement that we've done as part of police reform. And if you think about the overlap, many of our employees are community members. So some of the same issues come up. And how do you reconcile that? And how do you impact a culture that is generation after generation? And there are things about the culture that you don't want to change. And then there are things that have to change. And I say the word culture loosely, because it's cultures, right? Each precinct has its own culture.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sometimes just on a tour or a shift.

Tanya Meisenholder:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, there's a lot of work that has to be done. So it's great that you're in here doing it, and spending your time with me. And thank you very much, though I will say there's one thing you did get wrong.

Tanya Meisenholder:

What's that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're not middle-aged. I know you're just a youngster. Tanya, thank you very much.

Tanya Meisenholder:

Thank you, Jerry. Hopefully next time, we'll be able to do this at a different location.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

With adult beverages.

Tanya Meisenholder:

With adult beverages.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Perfect. Thanks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 33 of Reducing Crime recorded in the Big Apple in February, 2021. You can find a transcript of this and every episode at reducingcrime.com/podcast, and new episodes are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime. If

you're a college instructor and want multiple choice questions for this or any Reducing Crime episode, send me a direct message or DM as the kids like to call it.

Otherwise, be safe, and best of luck.