

Using Psychology To Transform Policing

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Thank you Dr. Dvoskin for including me in this program. I've had the honor of supporting NOPD's EPIC¹ program since its infancy, and I couldn't be more proud of what the Department has accomplished so far. Before I begin, however, I should point out that all the work I do in support of NOPD's EPIC program is pro bono. I was so taken by the program that I felt I could best help grow and promote it if I didn't charge for my time.

Mary Howell, who you all just met, and NOPD Internal Affairs Chief Arlinda Westbrook came to me back in 2014 and pointed out this little innocuous-looking sentence in the NOPD Consent Decree. It was Paragraph 109, and it read as follows: NOPD training shall include "role-playing scenarios and interactive exercises. . . including training on peer intervention"

In fairness, Mary and Arlinda not only came to me, they kind of ambushed me. They sat me down and pled their case. They explained the concepts of active bystandership and peer intervention. I had heard the terms before, but really knew very little about them. They emphasized the social science upon which the concepts were based. They explained how active bystandership could be taught as a tool, much like you can teach a police officer to properly shoot a gun, enter a house, or put on a vest. They introduced me to the writings of Dr. Staub. In fact, Mary gave me a reading list a mile long, including multiple books by Staub, *Ordinary Men* by Browning, and many more. My nightstand is piled high with books recommended by Mary. And then they asked me for my help. It's not easy saying no to Mary or Arlinda even if one wanted to. But the truth is, to paraphrase Dorothy in Jerry Maguire, "they had me at hello."

A few things captured my attention and imagination about the EPIC concept right off the bat.

- First, the science underlying the concept was compelling and, in my view at least, unassailable. Active bystandership was eminently teachable.
- Second, I was fascinated that police officers believed they were good at intervening when, in fact, they (like most of us) actually are quite bad at it.
- Third, I loved the idea of giving police officers a new, career-saving tool; actual tactics and strategies they could employ in the real world.

¹ [Post Conference Note: EPIC stands for Ethical Policing is Courageous. Working with a host of national experts, the New Orleans Police Department developed and implemented the EPIC program in 2015. The national Georgetown Law Center/Sheppard Mullin Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE) Project is built upon the success of EPIC. For more information regarding the ABLE Project, see www.law.georgetown.edu/IPP/ABLE.]

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- Fourth, I appreciated the simplicity of the idea. If we could teach police officers tactics to intervene in another's conduct safely and effectively, we might be able to stop many problems before they occur.

As a father of two teenage girls, the idea of stopping problems before they occur seemed worthy of further exploration. But I think what captured my attention the most was a chart I saw early on, which NOPD now uses when they train officers across the country. It was a pie chart with three pieces of pie. A small slice marked ethically challenged. A small slice marked saints. And a huge slice marked “the rest of us.” The title of the chart was something like “EPIC Focuses On The Rest of Us.” Unlike most law enforcement “reform” programs that focus only on the ethically challenged, EPIC was directed at regular people like me; people who would like to do the right thing and help others, but who simply sometimes lack the tools to do it well.

So we put together a working group of interested community members, patrol officers, NOPD rank, and a few outside experts, and set about to figure out what active bystander training might look like in a law enforcement agency. Our efforts were guided by a few core principles. I'm not sure we could have articulated these principles at the outset of our efforts, but, in hindsight, they clearly guided everything we did.

- First, provide guidance to the officers leading the creation of the program, but ensure the officers themselves were the actual creators of the program.
- Second, design something that would be embraced by the officers AND the community.
- Third, ensure the training was founded upon (and incorporated) solid social science so the officers would understand the why as well as the what.
- Fourth, develop training that taught a practical tool, rather than a conceptual program.
- Fifth, ensure the tool was robust enough to be used in three situations: Preventing mistakes, preventing misconduct, and promoting officer health and wellness. We call these the three legs of the EPIC stool.

I often ask myself why the EPIC program has been so successful and so universally embraced when so many other “reform” programs have failed. I chalk the program's success up to three things:

- One, the Department built the program from the bottom up, but with clear support from the top down. As [Dr. Joel Dvoskin] is fond of saying, programs work best when championed from the bottom up, top down, and from side to side.
- Two, we relied extensively on the relevant social science. Indeed, the police officers in the working group probably spent more time talking about things like diffusion of responsibility and pluralistic ignorance than policing. And Dr. Staub quickly became kind of a cult hero to the group — with Dr. Dvoskin only a short step behind.

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- Three, we were not afraid to make mistakes. Indeed, we made every mistake in the book. We would beta test the training in front of our working group, get beat up, and go back to the drawing board. Then we would beta test it on a small group of new officers, get beat up again, and go back to the drawing board again. We would fix what didn't work and then beta test it again, realize something different didn't work, and go back to the drawing board again. Ultimately, hundreds of mistakes, missteps, and miscalculations later, we had something we could be proud of and that would hold up to the harshest critics.

Now, 3-4 years later, we still work together to improve the program — and there still are elements that require more attention — but the program is sound, the tools are being used by the officers, and law enforcement agencies across the country are taking note and looking to incorporate active bystandership programs of their own.

EPIC has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Police Chief Magazine*, the *FBI NA Magazine*, and the *Washington Post*.² Hundreds of police leaders come to New Orleans each year to attend the Department's annual EPIC executive training conference.³ Countless agencies have reached out to NOPD for help training their own officers in active bystandership. Indeed, I just came from Iowa where I presented on EPIC to five police agencies. And, NOPD and I previously jointly have presented training to Washington DC, Richmond, Virginia, Clemson University, and Charleston, South Carolina, among many other police agencies, including the FBI National Academy. But I think we really knew we had achieved at least some of our goals, when both the Fraternal Order of Police and the Southern Poverty Law Center independently sponsored the Department's second annual EPIC conference. These two groups, while both strong advocates of good policing, typically do not sponsor the same events.

I'm going to end my remarks here because I really want you all to hear from Deputy Chief Paul Noel, who has played a lead role in getting EPIC off the ground and implementing it throughout the Department. It has been an honor to be able to play a modest role in helping the New Orleans Police Department build out this important program, and to share some of the program's history with you today. I have seen EPIC save careers with my own eyes. And I'm confident, in time, we will see the principles of active bystandership and peer intervention incorporated in most standard law enforcement curricula across the United States.

Thank you.

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² [Post Conference Note: For a more robust list of EPIC and ABLE media coverage see the In The News link at www.law.georgetown.edu/IPP/ABLE.]

³ [Post Conference Note: More than 400 police professionals, academics, and media attended the third annual EPIC Leadership Conference held virtually in August 2020.]