

Concerned Citizens for Justice Press Conference, September 24, 2020  
Press Statements Regarding Law Enforcement and Vulnerable Populations

Law Enforcement and Treatment of the Mentally Ill

Lisa Currier, Founder and Director, Chico Crisis Advocacy & Triage

I have spent countless hours navigating what's best described as "the system"—a figurative web of government and non-government agencies convoluted with endless paperwork and bureaucracy. Along the way, I have seen how mental health issues intersect with multitudinous social problems, including criminal justice, homelessness, access to health care, and addiction.

There is a humanitarian crisis across this country. Our fellow humans who suffer/survive mental illness are thrown into a stack with the lack of proper services. Police engagement should be the last form of contact. We need to understand the baseline of individuals. Listen to family members as allies to enhance getting into proper care. Respect behavioral health workers and accept they know when it is proper to know an individual is not stable and can help with getting back to baseline functioning and stabilization.

The passion and commitment from myself is in honor of my favorite person, my son, who suffers. This is not taken lightly and we continue to help anyone in need.

How do we begin? We engage and we build relationships. That is how we can continue on and be an ally, not an enforcer. When the police do not show up or decide the person is well enough, that is a form of abuse and force within itself. When a mom/dad called Chief O'Brien and Sergeant Sandoval there was no return call until another agency called them. This was a critical time for help. Instead it took 19 weeks, 6 police interactions, and a felony before any help was given. The lack of full mental health understanding and pushing aside has led to many harmed/hospitalizations/fatalities from the interactions or lack of action. Folks will then continue psychosis and decline. Tough spot, and we need to relieve the police and jails from a need that can not possibly be successful in this day and environment utilizing incarceration and detainment as a resource.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than half of those in the criminal justice system suffer from a mental illness.

Despite a growing movement to encourage law enforcement to receive basic mental health training, law enforcement officers are not credentialed mental health providers and are therefore ill-equipped to serve as the primary mental health provider in these circumstances. Given the increasing trend for individuals with mental illness becoming incarcerated, mental health providers must play a critical role in changing the current system. Psychiatrists/Psychologists/therapists have a unique role and responsibility to know and support strategies to advocate for alternatives to incarceration when appropriate, and to ensure continuity of care as patients transition between jail and community. 2020 – American Psychiatric Association

Law Enforcement and Interactions with People of Color  
Anthony Peyton Porter, Local Author

Talking Points

Colored people are easy to spot.

They're disproportionately harassed and killed.

The citizenry's problem with the police is bigger than racial bigotry, which is huge by itself.

Like Topsy, our police forces just grew out of slave catchers—no plan, no public input, no transparency. That's enough of that.

Citizen oversight that includes the power to hire and fire is a step toward complete transparency. Technically, we have citizen oversight via our votes, the silly council, and the city manager, and it doesn't amount to a bucket of warm spit—too many layers to matter.

Corrupt police contribute to mass incarceration, a blight on the nation, along with jaded judges and sadistic prosecutors.

We don't trust the police because their institutions are untrustworthy, biased, and secretive. Any particular cop might be a good, honorable, honest, compassionate human, and we ought to give any officer an opportunity to prove that.

## Law Enforcement and Treatment of the Unhoused

Addison Winslow, Community Organizer and former Street Outreach Coordinator with North Valley Mutual Aid

To the unhoused in our community, calls for public safety sound like hopes for invigorated attacks on their basic security. Indeed there is good reason for mistrust of the police, and the belief that accountability and service is applied discriminately to the very poor.

Anti-vagrancy laws such as those in the City of Chico disappeared around the same time as Jim Crow, and those yearning for the simpler way to uphold the old social order found refuge in the War on Drugs.

The War on Drugs in Chico looks like the Chico Police Street Crimes “D” Unit. They’re tasked with going after what are euphemistically called ‘quality of life’ crimes, which can include serious offenses like robbery, but most often the Street Crimes Unit hauls in people for low level drug offenses, probation or parole violations, and outstanding warrants, probably related to the former charges.

While the Street Crimes Unit’s arrests may focus on drug possession, the effect of their enforcement is more broad. They specifically target homeless people, who, due to ordinances such as those prohibiting camping or storing property anywhere in public places, are constantly in violation of some law and always at the mercy of law enforcement. It inflicts a permanent sense of insecurity and compels people into hiding.

This is part of a pattern of the Chico Police Department’s preference for improvisation in the enforcement of laws criminalizing homelessness, allowing them flexible control over unhoused people’s lives, where they can and can’t live, without the burden of justification (much less housing people in jail).

This preference became explicit in the dispute over encampments during the pandemic. My friend and fellow solidarity organizer Guillermo Mash and I reported on police requiring people to pack up their tents during the day. CDC guidelines said to not evict encampments, as it posed a risk of spreading covid-19 infections. When Vice Mayor Brown asked Police Chief O’Brian what the department’s policy on encampments was, he responded they were merely limiting the size of encampments.

It was a lie. They were requiring couples and individuals to pack up their tents, and preventing them from sheltering during the day.

Then, in an act of supreme hypocrisy, offended after being softly and indirectly reprimanded by the City Council for their skirting of CDC guidelines, for several months police refused to enforce the Council direction, which specified encampments must be clean and at a certain distance from waterways; offering the petty, legalistic excuse that they could only enforce ‘statute’ and not the emergency directives of elected officials. There was, essentially, too little paperwork

and police responded to reports by members of the public of messy camps along the creek exclaiming that their hands were tied by the City Council.

Chico Police have clearly for a long time had their own way of dealing with things, and without a systemic program to change their norms and dispossess them of the entitlement to treat people arbitrarily who are perceived as eyesores to more affluent and influential members of the public, the practice of policing will remain inhumane, unfair, and immune to oversight of elected officials.

However, all that is unique about the Chico Police Department is not uniformly bad. If the Street Crimes Unit is the 'bad cop,' designed to inflict terror and a permanent sense of insecurity for people whose lives have them constantly in violation of some law, the 'good cop' element of the strategy is the TARGET team.

Based on my experience over this year and interviews and conversations with people on the street, I hold a cautious, relative appreciation of the TARGET team. They purportedly operate on a philosophy of 'community policing,' tend to know the people they're policing by name, work alongside Park Rangers or a social worker, and regularly demonstrate an indifference to exactly the 'quality of life' offenses that has the Street Crimes unit smelling blood.

The TARGET team may hold the seed of a more inclusive, collaborative approach to public safety within our police department, but as it stands, notwithstanding the personal sympathies of the officers, it serves more as a token, or a public relations arm for matters relating to homelessness. Sort of like the ecology division of an oil company, the relegated existence of the TARGET team (who's highest ranking officer is a mere sergeant) removes and compartmentalizes sympathy with the principal subjects of policing from the rest of the police department. In other words, if we want good cops. the whole police department should act more like the TARGET team, and not rely on them to fulfill their obligation to be considerate to the impoverished.

The TARGET Team employs a social worker in their outreach expeditions, venturing into homeless encampments. The presence of the social worker is, of course, agreeable, but their (regardless) militarized presence and association with the rest of the police department works counter to the purpose.

An ER article from earlier this year revealed an important disconnect. A friend of mine, a resident of Comanche Creek, compared the TARGET team presence to the Gestapo, affecting on them a permanent sense of insecurity. Billy Aldridge, deputy police chief, responded incredulously. "Our TARGET officers have great relationships."

I don't suppose this was necessarily insincere, but the result of severe lapses of police intelligence on the street. For one, nobody, especially people living on the street, think anything good can come out of a complaint process. There is no citizen oversight and no faith in confidentiality for people exceptionally vulnerable to reprisal.

Additionally, the world is shaped around the police in ways they perhaps do not realize. For example, once I was bringing a jug of water to an elderly woman camped along Humboldt Ave. Next to her was a camp where 8 or 9 people shared company. A man on a beach cruiser

stopped at the ledge and, without dismounting, reported that the TARGET team was up the road making rounds. He listed the officers, including the social worker, by name — which attests to some efficiency of the TARGET mission — and immediately everyone at the camp split in different directions.

This miserable shortfall of intelligence-gathering compounds broader failures of communication, for the TARGET team are also the department's messengers. Related, I suppose, to Chico Police's preference for improvised enforcement and manipulation, written postings of policy on where people will be permitted to sleep or store possessions, why and when evictions are occurring, and other things of importance are avoided. The people they're supposed to communicate to, if they don't go out of their way to be absent for police visits, prefer they be as brief as possible; and I often found they were left lacking even a basic understanding of the purpose of the visit, and usually more cynical than circumstances warranted.

Overall, the police department chooses to prioritize the punitive 'street crime' approach to public safety over the communicative and understanding approach held more by the TARGET team. I hold out some hope that trust can be built and maintained between the very poor in our community and the police, but it will most certainly require a transformation of culture at least as meaningful as that proposed today.