Cops want to serve and protect, not be all-purpose society fixers

In the aftermath of this summer’s tragedy in which five law enforcement officers were killed by a sniper in downtown Dallas, Police Chief David Brown spoke the truth that every cop has known for too long. “We’re asking cops to do too much. We are. Every societal failure, we put it off on the cops to solve.”

Lock up the bad guys. Write traffic tickets. Help citizens in distress. That used to be the job description for our police. Not anymore. New laws and policies written by state and local governments may look good on paper, but they just pass more and more responsibility onto our already overworked police.

Throughout Texas, police officers have become a fall-back solution for cities cutting back on budgets. Stray dog in a neighborhood? Let the cops handle it. Citizens with mental health issues wandering the streets? Let the cops handle it. Racial tension dividing the city? Let the cops handle it. Homeless people setting up camps? Let the cops handle it. Kids skipping school? Let the cops handle it.

This kind of unwise, knee-jerk use of police force not only wastes tax dollars, it also greatly increases the response times during real life and death emergencies. Imagine calling 911 to report an armed robbery only to be told officers can’t arrive quickly because they are dealing with code enforcement issues.
Yet even with the additional responsibilities being laid on the shoulders of our officers, they are almost always the first city employees who feel the brunt of budget cuts with low pay and worsening benefits. The same goes with cuts at the Texas Department of State Health Services, which forces local police to pick up the slack.

Yet when anti-police activists shove cellphones in the face of an officer performing one of their hundreds of duties, he or she is told to suck it up and deal with it.

City governments are also greatly restricting the use of physical or intermediate force by police officers dealing with a volatile suspect, which ultimately puts their personal safety at risk. And a split-second decision made by an officer during a life-or-death encounter often results in intense public, political and judicial scrutiny for years to come.

We train our officers to be the very best. They keep the peace, they monitor our streets, and they protect our homes and businesses. But now they also serve as dog catchers, counselors, and child minders — in effect becoming nothing more than armed nannies.

We have the most educated and well-trained police force in the history of the country, and they are more than qualified to be a part of the solutions to the problems that we face. They are equipped with the knowledge and training to step in and assist and work to make the city safer from the front lines.

But our officers, no matter how well-trained and qualified, cannot do all the things of which they have been asked. They want to serve our community, and they want to do it by working alongside city leaders, who unfortunately seem unwilling to make the tough decisions necessary to find real solutions to solve our social problems. So the men and women who proudly wear the badge are tasked with the repercussions.

It is time that we listen to Chief David Brown. His wise words should trigger serious discussion about the role of police officers in our community. Relying on law enforcement to solve every societal ill instead of fighting crime is not smart policy, and it puts families at risk. It’s time we let our police officers get back to their real job — serving and protecting the citizens of their community.

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