New Strategies for Countering Homegrown Violent Extremism: Preventive Community Policing

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Good afternoon, it's a pleasure for me to be here. I want to begin by telling three police stories. I hope you are as entertained by these as my children. I have two children who, when most of you were telling your kids bedtime stories at night, my kids wanted to hear police stories. They are only twelve and ten right now. It all started about eight years ago when I was driving home—I had my wife and two kids in the car, and it was our family car, not my police car, and I was stopped at a traffic light, and I looked up ahead, I was about five cars back, and I looked up ahead and saw a huge fight going on in the middle of the intersection. There were people just rolling around on the ground, and I looked and noticed that one of them was a police officer. So again, I was in shorts and a T-shirt, it was summertime, and I jumped out of the van, and I told my wife, "You drive." And I ran up and assisted one of my police officers in actually taking into custody a man who had just escaped from a mental institution, and they were in fact fighting in the middle of the roadway. It was a pretty violent fight, and my officer was actually happy to see someone show up to help him, as he needed a little bit of assistance getting this guy into custody. So, as my wife was driving by with my children, my son just said, "Mommy, why is Daddy fighting with that man in the middle of the intersection?" And ever since then, they have been hooked on police stories, so I have three police stories to tell you.

The first one occurred in 1978. I was a very young police officer, and I had a good friend and trusted partner who had begun to work undercover. Back in the '70s, motorcycle gangs were still very active. On the West Coast, it was the Hells Angels; on the East Coast, it was the Pagans. And so we had a number of Pagans who were operating in our jurisdiction, and they were very active. Not only were they doing armed robberies, but they were manufacturing and distributing meth, LSD, and a number of drugs that were harmful to the community. They had a pretty big business going at the time. Well, my former partner had infiltrated one of these gangs, and he was starting to develop good information, and he got wind that there was going to be a major drug transportation—over five pounds of illegal narcotics were going to be transported by van across the area of Fairfax city. And he asks me, "Well, can you just—I don't want this to be a SWAT operation where we take them down, because then I'm done. They're going to know something's up. Can you just make what appears to be a routine traffic stop? And we'll just go from there." I said, "Sure, we'll do that." And, in fact, I just waited until I saw the van do something and I stopped the van. Ended up arresting three people in the van and confiscating the narcotics. As a result of that, he remained undercover, we got more information, we ended up serving a series of search warrants, and it ended up being an excellent case, and put probably close to a dozen members of the Pagan motorcycle gang behind bars, some of them for a long, long time. A very good operation for us at the time.

So fast-forward to October 2002, and there's a man who is in his thirties, he's ex-military, pretty disgruntled about life. He's angry that his children have been taken away from him. He's just angry about the hand that life has dealt him. He goes to Jamaica and meets up with a fourteen-year-old boy, whom he befriends—a boy who has lived in poverty, a boy who has been starved from any male influence in his life—and he proceeds over the next year to radicalize this boy and turn him into a cold-blooded killer. In fact, years later at a criminal trial, this then young man turned to John Muhammad and said, "You turned me into a monster." And, of course, I am talking about the D.C. sniper case, the Beltway sniper case that originated in Montgomery County in October 2002. For anybody who was here in this region during that time, you know how, during those twenty-two days, this region was just paralyzed; how people's daily routines of their lives were absolutely changed as a result of the actions of these individuals.

The third story I want to talk about occurred just about three years ago, in September 2010. There was a man named James Lee who was alternately homeless and renting rooms in Montgomery County. In 2008, he started developing mental issues to the extent that he was convinced that the Discovery Channel programming was harming our community, harming our nation. And he would begin to do protests in front of the Discovery Channel headquarters, which was based in Silver Spring, in Montgomery County. He would walk with signs protesting their programming, saying it was doing all sorts of terrible things, sending the wrong message to our nation and doing bad things to our nation. He actually put up a website that had all of the information about his doctrine and all the issues he had with Discovery. On September 1, 2010, he walked into the Discovery Channel headquarters and shot a gun into the ceiling and told everyone in the lobby to get down. Everybody actually just ran out of the building, and he was left with one hostage, a security guard. In the next couple of minutes, two more employees walked in and he took them hostage. So he had a total of three hostages for about four hours.

We were negotiating with him for four hours, and during that time he kept talking about what he was trying to accomplish by this act, why he was holding these hostages, the fact that he was ready to die for his cause, the fact that he was ready to kill these hostages, despite our negotiations with him. At one point, the hostages decided their lives were absolutely in danger, and I think they were. They decided to make a run for it, and they took off running for the exit. He had an explosive strapped to him, he went running after them, and by that time our SWAT team had gotten to right behind the wall where he was; they came out and eliminated the threat. Fortunately, no innocent people were harmed during that case. We served a search warrant. The next day, a man came into one of our stations and said, "I think that Mr. Lee guy, the suicide bomber who took hostages at the Discovery building, was renting a room in my basement." So we served a search warrant on that room, and we got a lot of things from his computer, not the least of which were training videos that he had made. In terms of putting his explosives together, that he actually narrated himself. So we got a lot of information after the fact of what he had been involved with over the last couple of years.

So I share these three stories with you because I think they all relate directly to this issue of countering violent extremism. And if you are looking for someone who is an expert in that, you have a couple of experts up here on the panel. I don't happen to be one of them. What I do know about is being a cop, and for the last thirty-seven years, I have tried to believe in my own head that I have been a crime fighter.

So we have these three instances: We've got a group back in the '70s that was certainly a group that was engaged in criminal activity, engaged in violent criminal activity, an organized group that was responsible for a great deal of bad things, many bad things—and certainly terrorized certain communities, certain areas with some of their activity. You've got two individuals who, as I said, paralyzed this region for three weeks. And then you've got Mr. Lee, who, the FBI told me afterward, was the first case of a suicide bomber to take hos-

tages in the United States that we had to deal with. All homegrown terrorists, these individuals crossed paths with the criminal justice system because they were committing crimes in our community.

Back many, many years ago—probably thirty years ago—the word "community policing" was really being thrown around, and if you asked one hundred cops what community policing meant, you would have gotten one hundred different definitions. But I will tell you there are two cornerstones of community policing: one is community partnerships and the second is problem solving. And you can get any other definition of community policing, but I'm telling you that is what it comes down to. And so what we've learned is that police officers, police departments, law enforcement cannot arrest our way out of any crime issue, terrorism issue. We'll never arrest our way out of these problems. The way that we solve these problems, whether it's criminal gangs, whether it's violent extremism, is to prevent it in the first place, is to intervene before it becomes a criminal act. So that's the reason we're using the community policing model. We've decided that the best way to do this is to make the right community partnerships and then to solve the problem—come up with a strategy that addresses the root cause of the problem.

And whether it was the kids drinking in this park—you know, every Friday night, we'd get dispatched to these kids drinking in this park, and then someone came up with this brilliant idea to put lights in this park so that they weren't hidden by darkness. And then the kids decided they would have to find someplace else, so this park was now a safer place at night. You know, or we could have kept responding every night to the park, but somebody actually thought about solving the problem. We partnered with the people who, you know, could actually put the lights up in the park. A simple, simple example. Countering violent extremism is a much more complicated example.

I will tell you that if you asked me on September 10, 2001, what the local law enforcement's role in dealing with terrorism was, I'd have told you we really haven't dealt with it. It's, you know, federal law enforcement, it's the intelligence community, they have that responsibility. Well, there is a shared responsibility now, absolutely a shared responsibility. But we are not—local law enforcement's role is not to replace what the federal government can do, what the intelligence community can do. They all have a role, they have a responsibility, but we have a unique role, and we have an ability to come at this from an angle that the federal government and the intelligence community cannot. And this is where—and I'm not going to steal any of Hedieh's thunder, because what she's put together is nothing short of groundbreaking, it's as groundbreaking as it is effective. I was certainly trying to do my part in terms of our role in trying to keep Montgomery County safe from all types of threats when I crossed paths with Hedieh, and she talked to me specifically about what we could do to address this issue of violent extremism and how the local police could play a role in preventing and intervening in this effort. What she described and what she has put together is a master class in community policing. It is putting the right community partners together. The foundation of that was the faith community. One thing that any cop knows, any politician knows, is that if you want to communicate with people, the best time to do that is very often, you know, on Sunday mornings, or for some folks on Saturday nights. That's when you can really get folks together, because that's when folks get together to practice their faith. And to get the faith community involved in this and to get them to join in as willing partners, and to understand what we are trying to accomplish, where everyone has a stake in this, I thought was going to be a very difficult task, but it turned out to be much easier than I thought. And a lot of that was because of the work that Hedieh did and does, and the fact that she is so inspiring in terms of the message that she gives.

I think that the role the police can play is we give a certain amount of legitimacy to this effort. You figure that if the police are involved, I think that does offer some legitimacy, but it also—there can be a trust component there, and not every police department has the trust of their community. And not every police de-

partment, not even Montgomery County, has the trust of everyone and every segment of their community. There are folks who—and I think that in Montgomery County we have a good working relationship with the public—we don't have a huge issue with people not reporting crime, although I will tell you in some of the newer immigrant communities, in Langley Park and in Wheaton and in some other areas of my county, I do know that there is a lot of unreported crime that goes on.

So how do we build that trust? How do we reach out, make sure that folks know that we are there to help them, help everyone, and make them comfortable to contact us when they have an issue? And all of this is part of developing a relationship with the community. It's not just talking about reporting thefts and that type of thing, but when somebody runs across a young person who finds themselves on a computer looking at websites that are not healthy for them and that are perhaps getting them to start thinking radicalized thoughts. How do we intervene there? How do we get folks to know that contacting the police is actually appropriate and actually might end up helping this individual? Well, I don't want this young man arrested, but I know that this person needs help. And again, we're not here to arrest our way out of a situation, we're here to solve problems, we're here to prevent bad things from happening. So you've got to get the right community partners together. And it started with the faith community, we expanded to the school community, and we spread the message every way that we can. We've had a number of forums, and Hedieh is going to talk about some of those, and we're going to do more.

Problem solving—we talk, specifically when we get a chance to communicate with the public, about how we can intervene in these individuals' lives. We educate parents and teachers and educate the community about what goes on when these kids get in front of a computer. Every parent, every single parent in this country, if you say to them, "Hey, we're going to talk about internet safety issues and some threats that are out there for your children," all parents are interested in that. They understand that there are tremendous threats on the internet. And so you bring people in to talk about that, and then you have a willing audience and you can talk about all the issues you want to talk about, to include countering violent extremism, but we're not just limited to that. Because we don't want to just limit ourselves to that. We don't want this to be, you know what, we want to talk to this segment of the community about preventing terrorism. That's not going to get you very far. This has to be a broader approach, and you have to involve more people so that there's a feeling that, you know what, everyone in our community, we all have an interest in our children's safety, and that's what brings people together. That's one of the ways we've gotten the response that we have. Hedieh has just a tremendous strategy in terms of getting the right people to talk to these folks, and that's the problem-solving end of it.

I want to finish up by just talking very briefly about how this is not the first time the federal government and local law enforcement have tried to partner together on an issue, but I can tell you this is a much more successful one. Back in 2002, then attorney general John Ashcroft decided that he wanted to get local law enforcement involved in identifying and arresting people who were here undocumented, and basically tried to rope all of local law enforcement into becoming the immigration police. It was a disaster. It ran counter to our mission, that mission of building trust in the community. And especially in places like Montgomery County, which has huge diversity, where we have a large number of new immigrants, both documented and undocumented—and I will tell you it's my responsibility to deliver police service to all of them. Just because someone is here as undocumented doesn't mean they can't be a victim of a crime, and certainly doesn't mean they don't deserve the best police service we can provide them. And yet when we were looked at, or when any police department was looked at, as the immigration police, you did get crime that was unreported, you did have victims of domestic violence, of rape, of just awful crimes not coming to the police because they were

afraid to report it, because they were afraid they would be identified as being undocumented and be deported. So this ran counter to our mission.

I can tell you that this effort of countering violent extremism is a great partnership. It's the way partnerships should occur. I will not try and take over what the NSA does, I will not try and become—there's enough intelligence agencies in this country doing great work, I don't need to be another one. But I can tell you that I have my fingers in the community, I have the trust of a community that I can get a message to, and people feel like they can reach out and, with one phone call, contact the authorities or police, health and human services, the schools, all these people who are sitting at the table saying, we're here to help you, we're here to keep your kids safe. We're easily communicated with, so we are coming at this from a very different angle than the federal government. And I think that this is what makes this effort so effective.

I'll finish by saying this: that what we're doing in Montgomery County is not just going to work in Montgomery County. This would work anywhere you have a police chief, or a sheriff, who is willing to help lead this partnership with wonderful experts like Hedieh Mirahmadi at their side. I've already talked to Hedieh about the fact that I know for a fact that friends of mine in jurisdictions all over this region would jump at the chance to get involved in an effort like this. There are probably one or two police chiefs who might not have an interest, but I can tell you that 99 percent of them would. This is something we want to highlight, that we want to duplicate, that we want to see occur in every jurisdiction that we can, because all it's going to do is make us all safer.

Thank you.