CRIME S.C.E.N.E. EXCELLENCE PODCAST

Episode Two

Case Officer, Control, and Communications

Introduction: The National Public Safety Partnership presents the Crime S.C.E.N.E. Excellence podcast, Episode Two, Case Officer, Control, and Communications. And now, retired Lieutenant Floyd Wiley welcomes Brian Russell, Deputy Chief of Investigations for the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, to discuss case officer, control, and communications in the second of five podcasts on Crime S.C.E.N.E. Excellence.

Floyd Wiley: Floyd Wiley here for the Institute for Intergovernmental Research. This is the second of five podcasts of which we will be discussing the critical elements when responding and managing major crime scenes. We're going to cover the second letter, C, of our S.C.E.N.E. acronym of the Crime S.C.E.N.E. Excellence concept. In this segment, we will discuss the importance of the case officer, control of the scene, and communications. For this discussion, we have Mr. Russell, retired captain from the Richmond, Virginia, Police Department, and a commander of the Major Crimes Division. Before his promotion to captain, he served five years as the officer in charge of the Homicide Unit. His past supervisory experience includes uniform operations, robbery, aggravated assault/sex crimes, the firearm and fugitive task force, youth and family crimes, arson, the community response team, property crimes, and the training development unit.

Mr. Russell is a 36-year veteran and served in the Organized Crime Division Narcotics Unit for 11 years. His assignments included the coordination of undercover operations, long-term historical drug cases, and political corruption. Other assignments have included long-term undercover, uniformed, special operations, street crimes, the Metropolitan Richmond multijurisdictional narcotics task force, violent crime, and the United States Attorney's Office political corruption task force. Mr. Russell has instructed for the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services Drug Cadre for the past 36 years. And he's assisted in offering the basic and advanced undercover investigators training manuals used by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. Brian Russell serves as the Deputy Chief of Investigations with the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice. In this position, he oversees investigations involving criminal, prison rape elimination act, and gang activities of juveniles who are under the care of the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice.

Brian, thanks for joining us today.

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Brian Russell: Hey Floyd, thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

Floyd Wiley: Listen, it's a pleasure to have some time with you today. Brian, from your past experience, let's start off our discussion with the case officer's responsibility when they navigate the initial response of a violent crime scene, but then let's move into the importance of control of the scene, and we'll finish off with this segment on communications on the crime scene and transference of chain of command. Does that sound good for you? A good format?

Brian Russell: Yeah, that sounds like a great format, Floyd.

Floyd Wiley: Great. So let's kick off with the case officer, Brian.

Brian Russell: The initial, actually first, responding officer is the initial case officer assigned to that particular scene. Now through the process, there's going to be several other case officers as the chain of command and control switch as personnel and resources start to respond to the scene to assist the initial investigating officer or responding officer to that scene. As a case officer, basically you're the first person on the scene. You're the incident commander in charge until a supervisor arrives. And it's your responsibility to take control of that crime scene until properly relieved. Knowing your authority and maintaining situational awareness is paramount to controlling the crime scene. Obviously, you have to maintain clear and precise communications with responding units to supervision.

So let's just talk about the first respondent case officer right off the start. You get the call for service, you respond to the scene, you arrive at the scene safely. That's the most important thing. And then you're doing an evaluation of what you're dealing with upon your arrival to the scene. And the first thing is, is that what do you believe has taken place? What type of crime? Do you have multiple victims? Do you have an evidence crime scene that's many blocks or is it in a contained area? And what is the magnitude of the problem? And what I mean by that is, is that you could have an active crime actually taking place or an active shooter taking place. So you have to be aware of what the magnitude is and what resources you're going to need to secure that scene or deal with the threat, so to say, if it's an active crime scene.

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Floyd Wiley: Let me ask you a question, you mentioned earlier about the case officer being an incident commander, sometimes patrol officers sometimes are intimidated by that word, the incident commander. Can we just touch on exactly what that means and how important it is to establish that you're the one that's actually charged, is that case officer?

Brian Russell: Yes. A lot of times what happens and what I have seen in my career is that somebody's not present on the scene, tries to direct personnel from not being present on the scene, which creates problems. So that actual officer is the incident commander and he or she is on the scene there, they should be directing any kind of additional officers to where they need to go, what areas need to be secured, getting the basic information out, if their suspects having been identified or you're looking for a certain vehicle or whatever it may be, and determine how many officers you're going to need to secure that scene.

Floyd Wiley: Exactly. And so even if you're a junior officer, yes, you're going to try and communicate with supervision, but you are in charge of that scene. It's yours.

Brian Russell: Correct. You are in charge until you're relieved by a supervisor. And then later on somebody from the investigative unit that responds to that scene.

Floyd Wiley: Right. So in terms of controlling that scene now, so you're the case officer, you're on-scene, you're the incident commander. Now it's your responsibility to take control. Let's talk about that.

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Brian Russell: Yeah. Obviously, you have to take control and here's the thing, when you get to the scene, it is paramount that the safety of the individuals at that scene are the most important thing. The first thing that we need to determine is does first aid need to be rendered? Does fire need to be called? Does EMS need to be called? You actually have to perform life support or CPR on the individual victim if it's a gunshot or if it's a violent crime to make sure that you can stabilize him until other personnel arrives. That's going to be the most important thing at the scene with a victim. But there also could be other potential dangers at the scene that you're not aware of. You have gas leaks, you could have a bomb situation, you could have a car that was involved in an accident, that's leaking gas. You have to be aware of that. You could have power lines down. So you have to make that assessment of your environment to make sure that anybody else coming into those scenes can come in there safely.

Floyd Wiley: Right. So in doing that, that's like a lot of responsibility for one person. And so when that case officer gets there, and let's just use that junior officer, at that point in time should be calling for backup. But when people come trying to assign people to those other responsibilities so that they can be a force-multiplier while he's gathering the most important information through note taking, to be able to pass on to supervision, right?

Brian Russell: Correct. A lot of times, dispatch will actually assist in kind of rendering assistance or additional officers to that scene based on the information they're getting from the E9-1-1 caller. It's probably highly unusual that if you get a call of a shooting or a homicide or an active shooter that you're only going to have one officer respond to that scene. More than likely, you're going to have multiple officers responding to that scene. And somebody needs to take charge. Somebody needs to be in charge. That usually should be the initial log officer to that call would take command of that particular scene until relieved.

Floyd Wiley: I got you. We're trying to control the scene and put the necessary people in place and the resources in place. So part of that is going to be also number one, detaining any suspects that are there. Once we've got the scene safe, we've got medical coming if there's an injured individual on-site, we provided medical. But the other portion is how do we start to detain or to communicate with witnesses, if you will, knowing our authority, how do we deal with that?

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Brian Russell: Depending on the scene, that could be extremely difficult. I have been on scenes in the past where the family members start arriving to the scene if it's a homicide victim, or if it's an individual that has been shot or received a serious injury. Obviously, those individuals are going to be upset. And initially what happens is that they, especially in homicide cases, at those crime scenes, it gets a little hectic because those individuals want to enter that particular crime scene because they're in disbelief that one of their relatives has been shot or, God forbid, is a victim of a homicide. So you're going to have an emotional family arriving at the scene. Depending on what time of day it is, you're going to have other members of the community that could be out there.

In particular, I remember working a homicide where a gentleman got shot as kids were getting off a bus. We had that to deal with. Things that I think hampers investigations is that witnesses don't want to cooperate. The first part of that process is, and like you said, Floyd, is that we need to identify those particular witnesses the best we can at those particular scenes. There's a lot of things you can do. Obviously, you can do a canvas. Witnesses are there at the scene, hopefully the community or people in those communities will step up and start providing information. If you can't hold them at the scene, obviously, if they're a witness, you can't take them into custody and hold them at the scene. You have to do the best you can with trying to convince the individual to stay at the scene, at least until an investigator or detective arrives to interview them or if they don't want to at the scene, and they're talking, it's extremely important that you document those statements that that particular witnesses is telling you.

And I will tell you nowadays, the thing that helps the most is body-worn cameras. You have that body-worn camera on, if they don't want to identify themselves or they don't want to provide information or contact information, at the least, you're going to have a video of that individual that the investigator can come back at a later date and try to identify those particular individuals.

Floyd Wiley: Right. And it also comes down to strong interpersonal skills when making contact, because knowing your authority, like you said, you can't detain the witnesses. If it's a suspect, we can detain and arrest him, but we can't detain the witness. So it really comes down to us being skillful in our craft of communications.

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Brian Russell: Correct. The officers need to be aware at the scene is license plate numbers are important. You have an LPR run that through there to record the license plate numbers. And at least there's something, give the investigator something to go back and follow up on. You see him go into a residence. That's 123 Main Street. Well make a note of that. And I can tell you that documentation is extremely important when the investigator has to follow up, especially with those witnesses that are uncooperative at this point and don't want to identify themselves or come forward.

Floyd Wiley: Got you. So let's move on to communications, making sure we have clear and concise communications from the responding units that are going there, to the case officer and supervision. Let's talk about that chain of events.

Brian Russell: A lot of times what happens when you change command, you're going to have the initial officer that responds to the scene. That's going to be the initial case officer that we're talking about. The uniformed officer. You're going to have a supervisor arrive at the scene, and usually it's going to be a first-line supervisor, sergeant, so to say, that will take over control of that particular scene. You are going to have other arriving units coming to that scene, depending on what the situation is. At the least, you're going to have an investigative team that's going to come out there and probably a forensics team that's going to come out there.

So basically, you gather as much information as you can for the initial case officer, who is a uniform officer, put it together, and then start disseminating it right to the initial case officer at the scene, which is the uniform officer, and get as much information as I can being an investigative supervisor. So, I had direct knowledge of what the individual was telling me. The sergeant's responsibility at that scene could have limited information and do limited things, but they're basically in control of that scene to make sure that the other officers are assigned tasks and get relieved and look out for the protection of that particular crime scene.

Floyd Wiley: Right. And so let me ask you about, as far as the radio traffic, can you discuss what that kind of should look like?

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Brian Russell: What I've seen before is, if you have an active scene or a major scene where it's a high-profile homicide or some kind of serious violent crime, what happens is that officers and especially supervisors want information right away. I get it. They have to do notifications, but the problem is when you talk about communication, is that a lot of times that's initial information that's being passed on is incorrect. And people are making decisions and deploying individuals based on incorrect information. My best advice I can tell you is just to slow it down. You have that scene secured. You gather as much information as you can. A lot of times in departments I have seen and especially when I was in Richmond, we used a briefing sheet to record that information. So we could actually disseminate it in a way that not only was written, but officers didn't forget what information they should be looking for at that particular scene.

And now you're going to have the investigative unit show up. At that point, the case officer and the command of that crime scene will change. It will change from uniform operations, who did the initial response to that scene, and now it's going to be the investigators that are in charge of that scene. And you're going to have forensic investigators. They all need to be briefed. You're probably more than likely going to have supervision and command staff that's going to show up at the scene. Those briefings should not be done by that initial officer. They should be done by a shift commander or lieutenant or a captain after all the information is gathered. Usually the investigative supervisor would brief the command staff. I did not like doing multiple briefings at the scene as individuals arrived. I said, "Hey, we're going to just slow down here. In about 20 minutes, when everybody arrives, it's coming, I will give a briefing." That kind of slowed things down and gave the investigators or the investigative case officer the time to gather information and give it to me and then I could actually brief them all at the same time.

Floyd Wiley: Got you. So, Brian, I'm going to take you in this direction, in terms of the communication, I want to talk about the chain of command as far as like the supervision and responding units monitoring the radio traffic, as it is a priority call and responding units should avoid stepping on each other during this priority radio traffic.

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Brian Russell: Yeah. I'll agree with that. When you have a scene like that, obviously, there's going to be some excitement by the officers.

Floyd Wiley: We've all heard it, right?

Brian Russell: Yeah. We've all heard stories. Usually what happens is and it should be a good protocol that once that initial officer arrives on that scene, dispatch should hold the air for that officer to make that assessment, to make sure that there's no threats. If medical or fire personnel are needed to get those individuals rolling because of the safety of the community and the neighborhood and, or the life of the victim is utmost important. So there shouldn't be all this chatter on the radio. Dispatch needs to just hold it until that initial officer actually releases the channel for regular traffic.

Floyd Wiley: Right. Some units can just use their MDT to communicate to dispatch that they're en route to that location, right?

Brian Russell: Correct.

Floyd Wiley: Then the other thing is sometimes you will find that, before all units are in place and we've kind of got this thing, we're starting to get it organized, that sometimes you'll hear people try to switch the frequency over to a separate frequency without making sure everyone's on. Can we speak to that?

Brian Russell: Yeah, that happens quite a bit, especially if you have an active incident where you're taking that particular incident and transferring it over to another channel to resume regular operations on the initial channel. Good practices, dispatch should tone out over the radio that if there's an incident at 123 Main Street, that all individuals on the scene will switch from channel five to channel seven. And that needs to be toned out on every channel within the district or whatever channel that you're particularly using.

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Floyd Wiley: Got you. I want to close out on radio traffic being recorded, on the importance of being concise, clear, and professional.

Brian Russell: Yeah. Obviously, as the investigator arrives, one of the things that he or she is going to do later when they start putting this investigation together is to pull all the calls for service, the phone calls, as well as all the radio traffic that takes place of people arriving to the scene. A lot of times, what we find out is that there is communication over the radio that actually could give us leads in particular cases that has maybe not been documented because of the excitement at the scene of what may be transpiring at the scene. A lot of times we find out that there's valuable information that those officers actually put out there.

And you mentioned MDTs, one of the other things that's going to be taken as part of the investigation, when we talk about professionalism and conduct at those particular scenes, is that MDT traffic or texts or use of the MDT to communicate is also going to be looked at as part of the investigation.

So officers need to be aware of that also. And keep it professional, even though there's a lot of excitement going on. And sometimes, it gets the best of us, but we have to keep in mind that we need to act professional in those matters because those incidents or that radio traffic and those MDT messages are probably going to show up later in either with the defense attorney or in court.

Floyd Wiley: Exactly. Hey, listen, Brian, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I also want to encourage our listeners to visit the Public Safety Partnership website at www.nationalpublicsafetypartnership.org. That's www.nationalpublicsafetypartnership.org for more information on this topic and other public safety partnership topics. Have a great day.

Brian Russell: Thank you, Floyd. Pleasure being here.

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