



# leadership formation

**Pittsburgh Police Chief Cameron McLay came to the city two years ago committed to improving relations between police officers and African American communities. With support from The Heinz Endowments, he's implementing a training program to change practices and build trust so that everyone benefits. By Elwin Green  
Photography by Scott Goldsmith**



As he helps Pittsburgh police develop a more professional approach to policing, Chief Cameron McLay sets the tone by cultivating his own business-like image.

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner died while police officers were arresting him on a Staten Island sidewalk in New York City. A cell phone video of the arrest showed that Mr. Garner was unarmed. He also was asthmatic and repeatedly gasped, “I can’t breathe,” as an officer applied a chokehold.

Outrage over his death was ignited as the video of the arrest went viral, then was overshadowed just weeks later by the police killing of another unarmed African American man. On Aug. 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Mo., 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot multiple times by an officer pursuing him as a suspected shoplifter.

The outrage at Mr. Brown’s death was heightened by initial reports that he had his hands raised in surrender when he was shot. Citizens took to the street in protest, and police responded with military force, evoking even more intense protest. “Ferguson” became a code word for police brutality, especially toward black Americans, and for civil unrest.

While Mr. Brown’s death, the ensuing protests, and the militarized police response made international news, Pittsburgh faced its own policing challenge: finding a new police chief who could restore the morale of a department after its last leader had gone to prison, and who could mend the frayed fabric of the department’s relationship with the city’s African American communities.

The case of Leon Ford, a black man who, like Michael Brown, was unarmed when shot by Pittsburgh police, was winding its way through the courts. While Mr. Ford’s shooting was non-fatal, he was paralyzed for life, and tension around his case sparked the question, “Will Pittsburgh be the next Ferguson?”

Cameron McLay was well aware of that tension as he considered applying to become Pittsburgh’s chief of police. “I analyzed what was happening in Pittsburgh, and realized that what I was trained to do was exactly what was needed,” he recalled.

What he had been trained to do was to train police officers. Having retired as police captain for Madison, Wisc., he was working as a consultant with the International Association of Chiefs of Police, training officers across the country in the association’s Leadership in Police Organizations program.

Based on a curriculum developed at West Point, the program focuses on the idea of “dispersed leadership,” which says that every officer is a leader. It also tailors modern behavioral science concepts for the law enforcement environment.

For instance, it teaches enough about how the brain works to help people become more aware of their own thought processes and emotional responses to situations. As a result, “before you reflexively react, you hit pause and analyze what you’re looking at and what you’re thinking,” Chief McLay said.

He went through the program himself while at the Madison Police Department and found it transformational. In Pittsburgh's police chief post, he saw an opportunity to transform an entire police department by sharing what he had learned. He applied for the job, got it, and began serving as chief in September 2014.

Now, after nearly two years, he is about to bring the training to the department on a scale that could provide a tipping point for organizational change.

The department will use a \$100,000 grant from The Heinz Endowments to help support a three-step process. The first step will be to hire a training consultant to overhaul all of the department's training. That process also may include visiting departments in other parts of the country to learn current best practices.

The second step will be to offer a customized version of the Leadership in Police Organizations' core curriculum, which is designed to be taught in three one-week sessions in three months. Chief McLay's goal here is to have 70 or more officers complete that training. He has stacked the deck in favor of the customized training's impact by having nearly 80 officers trained early on by staff instructors from the International Association of Chiefs of Police, giving him "change agents to help me with moving the organization forward."

The third step will be to have a group of officers complete the train-the-trainer program and then train 75 other officers in the core curriculum within the following year. Achieving the second and third goals will make a significant portion of the force, which now numbers about 840, into change agents.

"The goal is to teach ethical decision-making as the predominant decision-making model within the organization," Chief McLay said. "You can't exercise judgment and problem-solving skills in a complex universe by operating off a rule book."

Grant Oliphant, president of the Endowments, said that the direction in which the chief wants to take the police department lines up with the Endowments' own emerging goal areas of sustainability, creativity and learning, which will form the basis for considering future grant requests.

For instance, the broad goal of learning "really is about helping adults learn skills that will make them more effective in helping the broader community," Mr. Oliphant said.

One member of that broader community who will be keeping a watchful eye on the department is Brandi S. Fisher, president and CEO of the Alliance for

Chief Cameron McLay's efforts to improve relations between Pittsburgh police and local communities has included encouraging officers to forge bonds with residents. Officer David Shifren, right center, created a chess club in the neighborhood of Hazelwood, where students like Che King, left, Christian Gonzalez, second from left, and others can hone their strategic thinking skills. Meanwhile, Officer Chris Braden offers a friendly hand and face to one of the city's youngest residents while on the beat in Pittsburgh's Brookline neighborhood.



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Cameron McLay, police chief, City of Pittsburgh





Police Accountability. The organization grew out of citizen response to the beating of high school student Jordan Miles by undercover police officers in 2010.

“I’m happy that The Heinz Endowments is willing to financially support the idea of [police having] better community relations and better community engagement,” Ms. Fisher said. “I’m not a fan of foundations funding organizations to fix themselves. But because I know that Chief McLay is sincere in this endeavor, I trust this process.”

Chief McLay not only wants to help his officers master such skills to make them more effective; he wants to offer similar training to community leaders to expand their capabilities. He is working to present an abbreviated version of the Leadership in Police Organizations’ curriculum to civilians in July—an ambitious undertaking, but, he believes, an important one.

“[With] a lot of the social problems that we face, there’s plenty of room for lots of people to help,” the chief said.

All of this is happening alongside the work of the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and

Justice, a program of the Department of Homeland Security designed to improve relationships and increase trust between communities and the criminal justice system.

Pittsburgh is one of the program’s six pilot cities, and in that, Chief McLay sees the potential for the impact of his department’s new training to ripple beyond the city and beyond the next two years.

“Yale, UCLA, John Jay College, they’re all studying Pittsburgh now,” he said. “We have the opportunity for the next 20 years to have the country reading about our city.”

But his question for local leaders of every stripe whom he encounters around Pittsburgh is, “What do you want them to read about us?”

If the new training program transforms the city’s police department in the ways the chief hopes it will, those future scholars from the different colleges will read that Pittsburgh found a way to avoid becoming the next Ferguson by providing, as Mr. Oliphant described, “a police force that treats people with the appropriate respect and dignity that every citizen deserves.” **h**