



To Protect and Serve: How did we get here and what are we doing now

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Police departments across the United States have used the same motto for generations. The motto “*to Protect and Serve*” is a relatively simple phrase. The definition of “*to Protect*” for the most part has not changed. Officers investigate crimes and arrest perpetrators in an effort to prevent them from reoffending. The definition of “*to Serve*” changes on a regular basis, usually dependent on the latest, greatest idea. “*To Serve*” is defined by different ways of engaging the community in an effort to build community ties. These efforts are primarily done by going to community meetings, visiting schools, homework clubs, summer camps, etc. Traditionally, if your agency was active in the community, your agency was successful. Today the phrase “*to Serve*” should reflect a rapid growing portion of our society. “*To Serve*” should move in a new and radical direction, changing from one that is currently based on being visible to one of engagement, understanding, and expression.

“To Protect and Serve” took on new meaning last year in Annapolis. In a partnership between the Annapolis Police Department and Anne Arundel County Public Schools, we instituted a program developed by The National Compadres Network. Before getting into the details of the program, some background is needed.

One concern since 2014 is that our communities have been inundated with unaccompanied minors fleeing their homes in Mexico and Central America. In 2015 and 2016, 100,000 children were found along the U.S.-Mexico border and 200,000 others were found without an adult in other countries, a number that represents an increase from 66,000 in 2010 and 2011 (UNICEF). Aid organizations say that additional hundreds of thousands of minors are also likely traveling alone but are not counted in the report. *For more background on the reasons behind this surge, visit <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/working-with-unaccompanied-minors-from-central-america.cfm>*

Once they arrive to their new home they experience a let-down. Many of our children have a vision of what the reunification with their parents will be like. It is no different than what we would want for ourselves - warm hugs, big smiles, a cake, and possibly our own bed. Sadly, in many cases the homecoming is anything but what the vision is. Many times our children encounter a new stepmother or stepfather and brothers and sisters they did not know they had. They are told that they can only eat out of one kitchen cabinet because the other renters in the house use the other cabinets. They are told they can sleep on the sofa, not even being invited into the room the family rents. Then mother or father leaves to go to work. The crucial reunification never takes place. The child is enrolled in school. He attends school not knowing the language, encounters teachers that don't even greet them, looks around the room at the pictures of famous people hanging on the walls, and realizes they do not belong in school. They are not made to feel welcome and the pictures on the walls do not look like them and they wonder if they can be successful.

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We know that every child wants to be loved. We have been told for years that the number one reason a child joins a gang is to belong and be loved. There are many reports detailing how MS13 and other Latino gangs have grown in recent years. I draw a direct connection between the lack of love the children feel in their homes and schools with the sudden rise in gang numbers. Unless you have talked to and work with our children, you cannot begin to imagine the horrors they have lived, the amount of trauma they carry, and the lack of ability to be able to express their feelings and rid themselves of some of the trauma. It is hard to imagine the violence, abuse, addictions and broken homes they have experienced or witnessed in their young lives. Most of us will never experience .01% of what they have experienced.

This does not discount the trauma experienced in many of our minority communities. They too experience the same traumas as the unaccompanied minors. They too do not know how to express and relieve the stress. The trauma that many of our youth carry will eventually emotionally and socially paralyze them.

As I mentioned earlier, “to Protect and Serve” took on new meaning last year in a partnership between the Annapolis Police Department and Anne Arundel County Public Schools. For years, the school system’s bilingual facilitators and I struggled with how to help our children. We each developed a sense of responsibility to help the community. We have all had restless nights worrying about that one child or that one family. We all worked tirelessly to attempt to find a solution. We developed and implemented programs both individually and in groups. Each program made a positive difference; however we truly struggled to connect with our youth. We understood the unique trauma and pain that each of our children have in making the journey from their homeland to Maryland. The horrifying events that set the journey in motion. We held classes for mentoring groups and citizens in hopes that they would see our new arrivals for who they are individually, and not with a preconceived notion,

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the preconceived notion that at times would cause our children to sometimes wish that they were of another ethnic background.

Kelly Reider (Anne Arundel County Public Schools representative & English Learner Portal founder) found the National Compadres Network and brought the program to us. We completed our training and before we left the classroom at the end of the third day, the bilingual facilitators and I decided when we would start our first teaching circles. We had enough people to run two circles in one middle school and one circle at a second middle school. We decided to pick 10 - 12 young men that seemed to always be in detention or suspended from school. We selected our children and invited them and their parents to an orientation. We were confident that we would get parental support because we knew each of these parents and knew that they too were having problems with their sons. What we did not expect was the level of excitement that each parent brought. Not only did we get a resounding yes from each parent, but for some it was the first time that I had seen them smile when talking about their sons.

We were excited and thought we were ready. We knew that the majority of our children were apprehensive about attending. They each would have their own machismo and rough exterior. They did not disappoint. In the beginning they were not serious and each had a nervous smile or laugh. When we started to tell the “bridge story” (the bridge story is a generic story that describes how traumas enter our lives, change everything, and we realize we were not ready for what would happen next), we suddenly had their undivided attention. Each of their eyes were locked on the teacher like lasers. We could clearly look into their eyes and see a great deal of pain. We could see that they understood and felt everything we were saying. We did our best not show the pain we were feeling. What helped us the most at that moment was the additional excitement knowing that we had our starting place and we were going to move up from there.

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This new approach to the term “*to Serve*” paid off. Parents told us they saw improvement in their children's behaviors and teachers began to acknowledge our children for who they were and not for who they thought they were. Across the board grades improved and five of our children made honor roll for the first time. Bonds between family, community, school and police were strengthened.

Last year’s success has inspired us to bring El Joven Noble and Xinachtli to more communities. We continue our school based programs and have added programs outside schools, including two programs in the African American communities.

The gang problem is not a problem that we will arrest ourselves out of. We have tried that for many years and have not made measurable progress. These programs will not eliminate gangs either, however, they will strengthen communities. They will allow a child to be himself, they will provide a child an honorable path and not one of gang life, and they will create a lasting bond between police and community. It is time to redefine what “*to Serve*” stands for.