



Key Takeaways:

- Public safety has been a top issue for candidates and elected officials around the country, driven in part by a spike in gun violence.
- One challenge in the public safety arena is hiring enough police officers. Mayors must use a variety of tools, such as incentives and recruitment campaigns, to fill the empty officer positions.
- With the officer shortage ongoing, cities must examine the role of police officers and determine which of their job duties can be performed by civilians, especially clerical matters.
- Mayors need to establish a relationship built on trust with the Police Department—not just the top leadership. This means being present and accessible to rank and file officers.
- Messaging around public safety is also critically important in repairing the relationship between the community and the Police Department. Inflammatory rhetoric around crime can harm and undo the critical work of building trust between the public and law enforcement.
- The Mayor’s relationship with the Police Commissioner is one of the most important in the Administration. They must be able to communicate openly and honestly with each other.
- To move the needle on crime, a city must act strategically and develop a plan that recognizes the complex roots of crime. This includes the deployment of not only a police response, but a variety of other available social service resources targeted at residents that are at the highest-risk.

Column 4 - Public Safety Management

When Cherelle Parker was campaigning for mayor in the spring of 2023, the city was coming off a year in which more than 1,700 Philadelphians were shot, and 473 died from their wounds. Those ghastly statistics have improved some since, but public safety was a leading issue in the race, and Parker labeled it her “number one priority” after winning a hotly-contested Democratic primary. She pledged to use “every legal tool we’ve got” to establish “a sense of order in our city.”

Public safety was the sole topic for the fourth transition training session that the Committee of Seventy held this fall for the mayoral nominees. Parker and her senior advisors attended.

Nola Joyce, a policing expert who has worked with departments in Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia, and New Orleans after Katrina, addressed several issues. One of them is a shortage of police officers practically everywhere, which some departments have sought to address with signing bonuses and other incentives. “I truly believe police departments around the country are not going to get back to the staffing levels that they saw pre-2019,” Joyce said. “I just don't think it's going to happen.”

Joyce said departments are going to have to figure out what they want the police to do, and what can be done, perhaps even done better, by others. An example? “Some departments are hiring civilians to assist in investigations—doing computer searches, putting informational packages together for the detectives,” she said. “Some of that desk work a detective has to do can be done by somebody else and given to the detective to use.”

Parker included hiring civilians in her campaign platform, but civilianization has drawn opposition in the past. Joyce said it's important for a new mayor to build a personal relationship with the police department, “and not just with the commissioner or the top commanders.” Joyce continued, “Mayors need to make themselves present and known to the rank and file. It means going to the hospital when there's an officer injury or death, but not just that,” she urged. “Show up at a roll call once in a while.”

“It can build some good will and space,” Joyce said, “but it has to be authentic, and it has to be the same message to management as the rank and file and the community because they're going to hear about it if it's not.”

Joyce emphasized that consistency in messaging is important and forgetting it can have consequences. For example, she said when an officer is killed in the line of duty, a mayor can be caught up in the emotion of the moment. “[The mayor might say] you know, ‘we're going to take these thugs off the street, we're going to lock down this area until we find the guy,’ something of that sentiment to the people who may be at the hospital or at a press conference,” Joyce said. “Then the community groups that he or she's been trying to work with might hear that and think ‘whoa, wait a minute. That doesn't sound like what you've been telling us,’” she said.

Joyce said it's critical that the mayor and police commissioner “have a real connection – be able to communicate honestly and understand their roles.” Joyce also said the appointment of a Chief Public Safety Director—a controversial, newly-created position in Philadelphia—could be useful “with the right person and handled the right way.”

Many, including Mayor Kenney, opposed the charter change establishing the job because it might blur lines of responsibility with the police commissioner, or give City Council, which must confirm the appointee, new authority in the public safety area. Joyce said such a person “could help pull together other entities that have a direct role in public safety, such as the DA's office,

the sheriff, the courts, or probation, and also bring some community-based and educational institutions into this conversation.”

The session also heard from Courtney Scott, Chief Administrative Officer for Sharon Weston Broome, the first African-American mayor of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Scott, who manages public safety programs for the city, said Baton Rouge has seen a sharp drop in crime over the past two years, and she believes it’s in part because the city developed a strategic plan that emphasized collaboration. That means getting state, federal and local law enforcement agencies to work together, but not just that.

“It also includes municipal services, whether that’s the department of public welfare, blight, trash, housing, whatever it may be, along with community wraparound services,” she said. “And that work that I do really leans into a community-led strategy of prevention and intervention.”

Scott said Baton Rouge employed the strategy of “high risk intervention to identify and focus on people in highest crime areas who are at risk and pose a high risk; making sure they can access needed services.” Scott said key to getting the effort going was \$2.5 million in funding from the CARES Act, the massive Covid relief and stimulus bill enacted by Congress in 2020.

Parker appointed Kevin Bethel, a former Deputy Police Commissioner and more recently the School District’s Chief of School Safety, as her new police commissioner. She’s also appointed Adam Greer, a deputy inspector general and former prosecutor, as the city’s first Chief Public Safety Director.

Dave Davies is a journalist who spent decades covering Philadelphia politics and government. He is currently a contributor to NPR’s Fresh Air with Terry Gross.

Additional Resources:

- [The Mayor and Public Safety Infographic](#)
- [The Mayor and Behavioral Health Infographic](#)
- [Pew Report about Civilian Clerical Tasks and Alternate Responders](#)