

When police reform actually works

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There is a question reformers rarely ask: What happens when reform succeeds?



We know how reform begins.

Something goes wrong. Public confidence collapses. Investigations follow. Politicians demand action. Rules are rewritten, monitors appointed, committees created and new layers of oversight imposed. But reform is supposed to have a destination.

Aurora may finally be approaching that point with its police department.

The Aurora Police Department has spent years under extraordinary scrutiny. Some of it was deserved. Serious failures produced serious consequences, including a consent decree, independent monitoring and sweeping changes in policy, training, supervision and accountability.

That history matters.

But so does what happened next. At a recent Community Advisory Council meeting, Jameer Fitch, manager of APD's Office of Constitutional Policing, described something Aurora residents hear far less about: the machinery of accountability now being built inside the department. It is substantial.

APD now has an Office of Constitutional Policing supported by quality-assurance professionals, business-intelligence analysts, crime and data analysts and a data scientist. With one exception — a sworn sergeant — the personnel Fitch directly oversees are civilian professionals.

That matters because this is not simply police officers grading the work of other police officers. APD has deliberately brought outside expertise into the organization to examine what police are doing, how they are doing it and where problems may exist.

More important is how that information is being used.

Supervisors can examine officer-level data involving calls for service, overtime, citations, uses of force and other performance indicators. The purpose is not to have an algorithm declare an officer good or bad.

It is to find patterns that deserve questions.

That distinction is critical. Suppose an officer has five uses of force and ranks unusually high compared with peers. Is that evidence of misconduct?

Possibly.

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But suppose that same officer also responds to dramatically more calls for service than anyone else in the district. The number now means something different.

Or suppose another officer appears unusually low in productivity. That could indicate poor performance — until a supervisor discovers the officer spent much of the period on bereavement or parental leave.

The number was accurate. The conclusion would have been wrong. That is the danger of allowing statistics to do the thinking for us.

Data can reveal a disparity. It cannot always explain it. As Fitch put it, data tells a story, but it also helps the department "ask better questions."

That may be the most important lesson in the entire presentation.

We live in a political culture increasingly comfortable treating disparities as verdicts. If one group experiences something more frequently than another, the disparity itself is often presented as proof of discrimination, misconduct or institutional bias. Sometimes it may be.

But disparities are questions, not answers.

Context matters. Circumstances matter. Behavior matters. Deployment patterns matter. Officer workload matters.

Good institutions do not ignore disparities.

They investigate them.

And that appears to be precisely what APD is building the capacity to do. That is accountability.

We have cheapened the word by turning accountability into a synonym for punishment. It is not.

Punishment may be appropriate when misconduct occurs. But accountability is broader and more demanding. It requires an institution to know what happened, understand why it happened, determine what must change and then measure whether the change produced results.

Accusation is not accountability.

Neither is perpetual suspicion.

And this is where Aurora confronts the paradox of successful reform.

Independent monitor Jeff Schlanger told the group that he had sensed "not one ounce of resistance" to ensuring that bias plays no role in Aurora policing. He also described a department that once struggled even to know its own response times and now measures them while working systematically to improve them.

Then came the most important part.

When the current monitoring structure ends, the responsibility for preserving those reforms will increasingly reside within permanent Aurora institutions, including the Office of Constitutional Policing, additional oversight functions and the city auditor.

In other words, outside supervision is being converted into internal competence.

That is what successful reform is supposed to look like.

The purpose of outside intervention cannot be permanent outside intervention.

Its purpose must be to repair institutions until they develop the culture, competence and mechanisms necessary to identify their own failures and correct them.

Otherwise reform becomes something else: An industry.

Every improvement demands another committee. Every reform produces another monitor.

If no measurable improvement is ever sufficient, then improvement was never the real standard. A reform movement that cannot define the conditions of success has quietly defined the conditions of permanence.

Aurora should continue scrutinizing its police department. Of course it should. No institution entrusted with the power to arrest, detain and use force should ever be beyond examination.

But examination and condemnation are not the same thing.

Something significant is happening inside APD. Scrutiny is increasingly being built into the department itself. That deserves recognition — not because APD is perfect, not because misconduct can never occur again and not because oversight should disappear.

It deserves recognition because the goal of reform is not institutional perfection. No human institution can achieve that.

The goal is competence, accountability and continuous correction.

And the final test of successful reform is not how long the reformers remain.

It is whether the institution learned how to reform itself.

Michael A. Hancock is a retired high-tech business executive and a Coloradan since 1973. Originally from Texas, he is a musician, composer, software engineer and U.S. Air Force veteran whose wide-ranging interests — from science and religion to politics, the arts and philosophy — shape his perspective on culture, innovation and what it means to be a Coloradan.

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