

We Deserve Compassionate and Caring Cops

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Reasonable people know that physical power often has very little to do with moral correctness or justice. They know that the concept of “might makes right” is not a good guide in deciding ethical questions. In law courts, judges and juries use criteria, other than physical force, when they seek fairness and justice. We hope, too, that police will make thoughtful decisions when they are faced with awkward situations while they are enforcing the law.

Doing police work can be a dangerous task. Our society empowers police with authority to carry weapons, and use them in certain situations. Police are called upon to intervene in some very difficult domestic arguments, drug offenses, thefts, and even in attempted murders. So our police need special legal authority and weapons to control and protect citizens. I am happy that none of my own family chose to be police officers. Too many of our police have given their lives while serving in the dangerous roles they undertake. I respect law enforcement officers. I would not want to live in a society where good police officers are not present.

Recently, news media have presented front-page examples of some actions that many of our citizens regard as excessive force by police, either by guns or by unnecessary physical force. I do not know all the facts in such cases, so for now, I am not in a position to make accurate judgements about whether or not the police officers acted appropriately in these cases.

Fortunately, we have boards to review police actions. We have courts that have authority to weigh the facts in these cases and make judgements on whether or not police have abused their powers.

Most of us have to view possible cases of police abuse from a distance when we are in the process of forming opinions on whatever partial information we have. Ethical questions involve ideals. So those who seek ethical answers must think about how we would want our police to act ideally.

Here are a few thoughts on how police would act ideally. They should know the laws within which they are to act. They should be calm and not given to letting their emotions rule their actions. They should be impartial concerning the racial, sexual and ethnic backgrounds of the people with whom they deal. They should avoid stereotypical characterizations in which people are judged in advance according to their dress, their age, or the occupational choices they have made.

Police should be as knowledgeable as possible about how some mental illnesses present themselves in everyday situations. They should know how drugs, both prescribed and illicit, cause some users and abusers to act as they do.

Police should be courageous so they aren't ready to use excessive force for fear of being attacked themselves. They should learn the techniques of de-escalating rather than escalating anger, anxiety, depression, rage, and other dangerous emotions.

Police should show compassion, caring and respect for human life. They should use their special authority and their weapons with care and with respect for the lives of both the perpetrators and the victims of crime.

What I have described is some of the ideal characteristics and temperament of a good police officer. Yet there is more. Police officers need to be healthy and strong. They should be in excellent physical condition and in excellent mental health as well.

What do police officers need from us? They need public support. They need good salaries. They will often benefit from taking courses that inform them about the best approaches for dealing with mental problems and bringing themselves up to date on the effects of illicit drugs. They must understand the growing technological information about guns, radios and radar, electronic surveillance, explosives, life-saving techniques, road safety, and rescue procedures. I am sure

that I have left out many important criteria, but hopefully, I have included enough to let readers know that police officers deserve strong public support.

We need police officers acting with strong moral character and integrity. While we expect high standards from them, above all, the public wants our police officers to exhibit steadfast, ethical standards.