

In Practice Podcast

When Public Transportation, Police, and Homelessness Intersect: Supporting a Vulnerable Population

Transcript

Panel Members

- Christopher Trucillo
Chief, New Jersey Transit Police
- Laura Hester
Deputy Chief, New Jersey Transit Police
- Polly Hanson
Senior director of Security, Risk, and Emergency Management, American Public Transportation Association
- Robert V. Wolf
Director of Communications, Center for Court Innovation

Christopher Trucillo [Teaser]: *The police are put in situations to deal with people and issues that government has not figured out how to handle adequately. We want to help people. We want to make a difference in people's lives. That's the challenge and frustrating part, I believe now, as we come out of COVID.*

Robert V. Wolf: Hi, this is Rob Wolf with *In Practice*, a podcast of the Center for Court Innovation, about people who work in or with or adjacent to the justice and legal systems and are implementing reforms, overcoming challenges, and solving problems. As anyone who has ridden a bus or train knows, all kinds of people take public transportation: commuters, school kids, tourists, people running errands. There are also people who ride trains and buses or spend time in stations who lack permanent housing. For them, public transportation isn't as much about going from one place to another, but about finding safety and shelter. The factors that lead people to use transit systems this way are many: loss of a job, a mental health diagnosis, drug use, and other economic or health problems, which can lead to eviction, and then there's the limited capacity of shelters or other social services to help address their needs. And of course, sleeping outside on the street can be dangerous because of weather or crime.

Wolf: And over the last year, there has been the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated all those problems. A University of California study noted that fear of infection in homeless shelters and reduced capacity due to physical distancing requirements drove more unhoused people to take shelter on the streets and in transit settings. Now that the country is opening up, as the pandemic wanes and as more people return to public transit, the health and well-being of the unhoused is front and center in the

minds of many. With me today are three people who have spent a lot of time thinking about and working on this: They are Polly Hanson, who is Senior Director of Security, Risk, and Emergency Management at the American Public Transportation Association; Christopher Trucillo, who is Chief of the New Jersey Transit Police; and Laura Hester, Deputy Chief of New Jersey Transit Police. Thank you, all three of you, for joining me today on *In Practice*.

Christopher Trucillo: Hi, Rob. We're happy to be here with you.

Polly Hanson: I just want to say thanks, Rob, for having us to talk about this really important topic.

Laura Hester: Hi, Rob. And thank you. I agree. Thank you for having us. It's a very important topic, and we're happy to be here to talk about it.

Wolf: It's a pleasure to have all of you here. So why don't we start out with a little context, maybe. Chief Trucillo, I know unsheltered people or people without housing, they've been riding the rails since trains were built. In New Jersey, where you are police chief of New Jersey Transit, what factors contribute to that today? What are you seeing?

Trucillo: Well, I'll speak specifically, Rob, to New Jersey, but I think what you're going to hear from me, my counterparts in transit policing across the nation would probably echo the same sentiments. You mentioned a number of things in your opening remarks, things like mental health. I think in New Jersey, we're seeing an increase perhaps in people with mental health issues who are frequenting our stations and terminals and riding our different modes of transportation. I think perhaps services have waned over the years for those with mental health issues. And they're not perhaps getting the services, the medications, that they may need to help them control their issues.

Trucillo: I think the other thing that we see here in New Jersey is a high incidence of addiction, whether it be to opioids or drugs and/or alcohol, and that leads to a decline and that leads to some of the issues that you mentioned, people losing housing or losing the ability to work and therefore becoming homeless because of that. So those are, I think, the three main buckets that we see. Then of course, the final one is those who were truly homeless. Perhaps they don't have a mental health issue, they don't have an addiction issue, but because of the economic uncertainty in their lives or an event that prevents them from having income in any given time, somebody could find themselves on the street and homeless looking for shelter.

Wolf: Polly Hanson. Let's go to you for a moment. You can give a, I think, a more national perspective, though I imagine, as Chief Trucillo says, what's happening in New Jersey is probably reflected somewhat nationally. What have you seen? Do you have a sense of what COVID-19 has done and what other factors may be exacerbating the challenge facing people who are housing insecure and seeking shelter on public transit?

Hanson: Yeah. Even before COVID, the homeless assessment report that's provided to Congress by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development stated that on a single night there are over 500,000 people who experience homelessness in the United States. And you heard Chief Trucillo elaborate about

things that have happened because of COVID that even increased that number. And what people say is that it's increased and that the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness is a reason for the increase in homelessness. And so many of the people who are homeless stay outside, in abandoned buildings, or other locations that really are not suitable because they don't want to go to shelters.

Hanson: And so sometimes individuals struggling with homelessness use public transit, and certainly in the beginning days of the pandemic did because everything else was shut down. So you might've chosen to go to the library or go to Starbucks, but you couldn't because it was shut down. So you saw folks utilizing public transit vehicles, facilities, and shelters as a safe place, because they are, and to get out of the elements. And so this is something that all of Trucillo's—the Chief's—colleagues do speak about, and APTA's [American Public Transit Association] had a number of workshops and conversations. And interestingly enough, a group of transit security, public safety, mental health, and crisis interventionist specialists have come together to talk about best practices and particularly key performance indicators for the agencies that have just recently hired mental health clinicians and crisis intervention specialists.

Wolf: Let me go back to you, folks who work for the New Jersey Transit Police, either Chief Trucillo or Deputy Chief Laura Hester, I'm sure you're seeing more and more commuters starting to return to using the transit system as we're entering this hopefully post-COVID-19 world. And so I know there's more urgency than ever to help people who are using transit for shelter. And I know the pressure is often on the police to address this issue, but I don't imagine that that is ideal, that either of you think that that is the ideal way to respond. So I just wonder what your take is on this, and if you have frustrations or what your thoughts are.

Trucillo: Well, let me begin with the frustration, I guess. Certainly as someone who's been in law enforcement quite a while, what do we see in society? We see when there are very difficult problems, problems so difficult that even government doesn't know how to deal with it—somebody has to deal with it, Rob. And that somebody is always the police, and the police are put in situations to deal with people and issues that government has not figured out how to handle adequately. Police all across the country deal with these difficult things on a daily basis. You talked about now, hopefully post-COVID, what's the new challenge? Well, public transit has been decimated. Here in New Jersey, in the height of COVID, our ridership plummeted. But now we're in a position where we see our ridership coming back and we're encouraged.

Trucillo: But pre-COVID, homelessness in transit facilities, people had compassion, they understood. They may have not liked it aesthetically, but they understood and were compassionate, I believe. But now it's not just an aesthetics issue. It's not just a security issue. Now it's a public safety and health issue and we need—and when I say we need, I'm not talking now singularly just about New Jersey transit—I think our nation needs for our economy to see public transit come back and be what it was prior to COVID. And for that to happen, I think people need to feel safe from a health perspective. And that squarely falls on dealing with people that I like to refer to as vulnerable people who have the problems we mentioned earlier, be it mental health or addiction. To service them so people are more comfortable utilizing our facilities.

Trucillo: And then just briefly, if you don't mind, I feel passionately, as I know my fellow officers do, that this is a social responsibility and we all understand and take that responsibility seriously. We in policing are in the help business. We want to help people. We want to make a difference in people's lives. That's why we're in this business. That's the challenge and frustrating part, I believe now, as we come out of COVID.

Wolf: Polly, why don't you give us a little national perspective again. We can talk about how transit police have created in response to the concerns of the unsheltered using transit specialized programs, outreach programs, for people. And maybe you could talk generally what these programs look like, what are their key features? And then I'll turn to Deputy Chief Hester to talk about New Jersey Transit Police's specific program.

Hanson: I'm going back to Chief Trucillo's point. I think that certainly we understand that transit agencies strive to preserve the quality of their transit environment and provide high levels of customer service. And of course, we are in the business of giving people a safe, reliable ride to work, home, school, doctor's appointment, wherever it is you got to go. And going back to Chief Trucillo's point, opioid addiction has increased and certainly has during the pandemic, but then coupled with the other factors he mentioned, you do have, and it's not just transit police, but transit agencies recognizing that there are a variety of strategies they need to employ. And some of that is to engage and get the support of other partners. And so people partner with the local jurisdictional Salvation Army or organizations that focus on attempting to get shelter or housing for those who do not have it. And I think that's where this works the best.

Hanson: And then other agencies are hiring mental health clinicians, understanding that there are particular skill sets there, and I think, the data shows that you have to come out and develop a relationship. And we're not suggesting that the police can't do that, but we know that post—the death of George Floyd, there's been a call for police to be utilized in other ways, and to have other folks, professional staff, that are nonsworn may be the first responders to some situations. So many agencies have gone to hire mental health clinicians. The Portland [Oregon] Transit, TriMet is their name, has done that. So has the transit authority in Denver, which is called RTD. Austin's transit, CapMetro, has just created a public safety program that involves these components. And then the Bay Area Rapid Transit district, BART, in San Francisco, Oakland, has done a variety of things, and one is actually to partner with ex-offenders.

Hanson: Because going back to some of the issues that Chris brought up, people were having a hard time accessing the elevators there, and the disabled community who needed them, couldn't use them. So BART got complaints, and it created some maintenance issues, and so they partnered with an organization that helps get ex-offenders jobs, and the ex-offenders kind of monitor the area and direct people to where they need to go for the right facilities and for the right purposes. And it's reduced their maintenance costs and made things better for everybody. So I think that transit has been very innovative and unique. And our colleagues in Philadelphia, at SEPTA, have recently engaged with social service agencies because of the issue that they have with homelessness and addiction. And so they've got folks that themselves were addicts out now, speaking to folks that live the life that they lived, trying to

convince them that there might be other things to do and another way to live and trying to support those people and help them get the help that they need. So those are some examples of what transit agencies have done.

Wolf: It sounds like one of the themes is trying to alleviate some of the burden and responsibility from the police, the policing arm of the transit agency, and bringing in some of these professionals or experts or people with lived experience who can assist.

Hanson: They do, but I think that Deputy Chief Hester can give some really strong examples of how transit police are effective because the New Jersey Transit Police program has been really effective. And so it's not one size fits all. There's a variety of different ways that this is done. In LA, they contract with the sheriffs and local police, and they do go out with the social workers. So I think that you see it done in a variety of different ways, depending on the resources you have. But I think that Deputy Chief Hester could talk about New Jersey Transit and how they deal with this in a very effective way.

Wolf: Great. Well, that's a perfect transition. Go ahead, Deputy Chief Hester.

Hester: Thank you. So New Jersey Transit has five officers that are trained in crisis intervention, and we're a statewide agency, so they travel all throughout the state and our train stations, our bus shelters, and our right-of-ways. And they engage the unsheltered individuals and ask them if they need some type of help or assistance. And it's not easy, they go back multiple times because it's building that trust with that individual to get them to actually say that they want some type of help. We partner with social services. One of our strong partners is the Volunteers of America. Volunteers of America, they offer job training, education assistance, medical referrals, vocational training. So we have a lot of social service programs that we work with. We do multiagency outreach programs that were held pre-COVID at our train stations, where we brought all these agencies in. We have diversion programs where if someone has a warrant, they come in and their warrant is vacated. Now that's changed. Now they're expunging warrants and allowing people to get services by expunging their warrants.

Wolf: Since you mentioned the five officers, could you just say a little bit more about what kind of training they go through? How were they selected? Are they volunteers?

Hester: So they're volunteers. They're crisis intervention-trained, they network and work with a lot of agencies, and go to some of the social services, some of the training that they do. These are officers that are very passionate about this field of work. They approach their commanding officer, which is filtered up to the chief of police, and they actually ask for these positions. We have one officer that works at one of our larger commands who's been doing it for multiple years, and he's connected people to services, he's connected an individual that was away from family for over 20-something years and connected them to his family.

Wolf: Chief Trucillo, this work, as people have said, and you have said, it goes beyond, in some ways, what is traditionally conceived of as the role of a police officer, I think. Post-murder of George Floyd, has the conversation changed? When you initially invested in these five officers to do this outreach, what was the conversation like then? And what's going on now?

Trucillo: Well, I think Chief Hester hit on a very important point that I'd like to elaborate on. I always say here at New Jersey Transit that dealing with the vulnerable populations that frequent our stations in terminals—and I've been in transit, like Polly and like Chief Hester, for a very long time—and it's just the nature of our work. It's every police officer's responsibility. Socially, from a law enforcement perspective, from the perspective of we owe our customers the best environment we could provide for them, we owe them feeling safe and secure while they're traveling on our system. We strive very hard, we don't want our customers to worry about their safety. We want them to feel comfortable and safe when they're with New Jersey Transit. But specifically you mentioned that Chief Hanson mentioned George Floyd. So the difficult problem is motivating officers at a time when they feel they may not be as appreciated.

Trucillo: They may feel that if they make a mistake, it's something that will impact them and their families. So the hard and difficult part is trying to keep our officers focused on what their mission is, keep them motivated, and always—here at New Jersey transit, we have our mission and our core values, and we always try and speak to our core values. And one of them is commitment. And the other one is courage. Courage to, even with all that's going on, even with the lack, I'll say, or the decrease in public trust, to have the courage to move forward, be professional, and understand that you have a mission and a job and people who are counting on you. The people that might not be as vocal as others every day, but certainly, they're counting on us every day for their health, for their safety. And I'm proud here at New Jersey Transit that I have a department, for the most part, that our officers get that. They get that balance between their professional responsibilities and their social responsibilities.

Wolf: Deputy Chief Hester, you had mentioned some of the community-based partners you work with, the organizations. Could you talk about why it's important to partner with other organizations and maybe talk a little bit more about the agencies and organizations you work with?

Hester: Sure. So most of our multiagency partners, we deal with superior courts, the jails, hospitals, volunteer organizations which supply our soup kitchens, clothing, might be someone that just needs a shower or something like that. Veteran services, there's a lot of, as the Chief said, emotionally disturbed people that are homeless that don't realize they're entitled to benefits from the Veterans Administration. And that's where our crisis intervention officer links up with those types of services and pairs that individual up with the services. Sometimes it's housing, they're placed in housing because they're entitled to benefits that they're not aware of. So these are some of the services. And as I said earlier, pre-COVID, we've had—we'd pick a station throughout the state, and we'd invite all these services to our station. And people would go in and go from table to table to get the services that they needed.

Hester: And we would have vans waiting outside the facility that we held this multiagency outreach program, and we would be able to transport individuals to services that they needed. So this program works because everybody's on board, as our chief said, Chief Trucillo, and our commanding officers are doing their job and what they're supposed to be doing in terms of this. They meet on a regular basis, and they talk about what the things that are going on in their commands as well in terms of these unsheltered individuals. And I think Chief Trucillo would like to talk about one other aspect.

Trucillo: And we're always looking to see what can we do and what resources could we bring to bear. Recently, for instance, we were awarded a state grant, CARES grant, and that's going to enable us to do things like bring social service workers in our facilities and work, now, side by side, as Chief Hanson said some agencies are doing. So we're going to have that ability, now, to do peer-to-peer counseling. We're going to have funds to purchase some food items and some clothing items because oftentimes folks have nothing. So before you can help them in terms of a program for their addiction or for their mental health, they may need a pair of socks. They may need a clean pair of underwear, they may need a sweater or a covering in cold or cool weather.

Trucillo: So we're going to have the opportunity to have a cache of these items on hand, so we're very grateful. And then the other thing, in this particular grant, we're getting some funds for NARCAN. And we here at New Jersey Transit—NARCAN, as you probably know, is an antidote, it's quite miraculous, actually, for someone who is about to die of an overdose of an opioid. You deploy the NARCAN, a nasal spray, and it's like they come right back to life. And last year, we deployed NARCAN across the state over 230 times, and we saved 226 lives in the process. So we always want to be ready to help this population, as well, in that area.

Wolf: That's an incredible number. That speaks to your reach and the help that you're able to provide, but also the size of the challenges that you're dealing with. In fact, how big, just to give people a sense, is the transit system in New Jersey? And how big is your force?

Trucillo: Well, we're a statewide entity. We operate in 21 counties. We operate in all the major centers in the state, in Newark, Jersey City, Atlantic City, Trenton, Camden. We have officers assigned to all of those locations. Rob, I don't usually publicly discuss size, for counterterrorism purposes, but we have no shortage of work. I'll put it that way. Our officers are very engaged, very busy, and very active.

Wolf: Okay. Understood about talking specifically about the size, but let me ask you about your work as a leader. And if you have some recommendations for other chiefs who might be listening in terms of how to implement a program like this, how do you start a program like this and motivate people and make sure it works well?

Trucillo: Well, you hit a key word, Rob. You said motivate. When I was a new cop, I never asked why, I just did. But younger generations today, I think, need to know why. So I talk to my command staff, my mid-level managers, and I talk all the time about explain the why. Let's tell our officers why this matters, why it's important, why they should be focused on it, why it should concern them. And I'm proud that when they know the why, they get it. By and large, the officers get it. Chief Hester mentioned an important thing, also. While I said that this work is every transit police officer's work, the chief mentioned, and she's right, you can't force somebody into this job. This job is not because you want certain days off or because you want a certain tour. This job is because your heart is in it.

Trucillo: This job is because you're personally touched in some way, and you want to make a difference with this community, and you want to help those less fortunate. And all of the officers who specifically do nothing but outreach when they're here at New Jersey Transit, as the chief mentioned, the role of volunteers, that's a requirement. And I make it a point to always ask why. I ask them why. Why do you

want to do this? And I hear the passion and conviction in their voices. And they take that with them into the street, into the stations, on the midnight tours, into places that you and I and most of the public would never want to be. And they go there time after time. And the chief also mentioned the frustration. I'll give you just an example, I have some numbers: From May 1 through yesterday, May 26, our outreach officers have had 445 contacts.

Trucillo: And of those, 74 people accepted some kind of help, some kind of service. And that's great. And we're happy that we were able to help 74 people. But the difficult and frustrating part is that 371 refused assistance. But we don't stop because of that. They'll approach those 371 again and again and again. And hopefully, the goal is to get them at that moment, and sometimes we know when you're at the bottom, you really got to get to the very bottom before you'll accept any help. And we go and try over and over again. And I'm so proud of the work that my outreach officers do. I'm proud of, generically, of the support that my regular officers do because oftentimes an officer will be on post, and they'll see a problem, and they'll alert the outreach officer, or they'll bring the person to the outreach officer.

Trucillo: They'll do the initial work, and then they'll let the specialist finally do it. But I think from a leadership perspective, it's letting people know it's my priority, letting my command staff know, "Hey, we're in this business and this matters," supporting the people who are doing the work, not just let them out there and don't touch them, to talk to them periodically to make sure they're motivated, to check on their mental health because as we talked, the job is very frustrating, and to try and get them as much support as we can. Just recently, we managed to get two vans for their use. So that's a morale booster. The CARES grant that I talked about is a morale booster. And then hearing the chief and the deputy chief and the command staff talk about how important it is, that's a motivator for them as well.

Wolf: And why don't we wrap up with Polly Hanson. Now that we just heard from Chief Trucillo with some of his advice for leaders about implementing this program, could you share some of the keys to success that you've seen in the field in terms of implementing these kinds of outreach programs in transit agencies?

Hanson: Yes, I can. And we just really touched the surface here. We didn't even talk about juveniles. Certainly, Chief Hester referenced veterans, and there is that component to this that they represent. But there's also kids that have been kicked out of their houses or left for other reasons. And what we know from the programs that work the best is that you do have to engage. So you've got to engage and partner and get the support of other resources because, as we discussed here with New Jersey Transit and the other programs, transit can't do this by themselves because this is a community problem. And so there will have to be partnerships with your local jurisdiction and the nonprofits that provide services. So it really is the engagement and support. And one of the other things we didn't reference is the transit environment can be inherently unforgiving.

Hanson: And so in many locations you have people camping out right next to the right-of-way, where trains run. And if there are mental health issues or addiction problems, and maybe somebody's not at their best, and then they place themselves next to tracks where trains are moving, that's a concern. So there does have to be this engineering and maintaining component as well, where people are going out

and checking areas that they know are campsites or hot spots to make sure that people are safe and going out there with the services so that they can do what Laura talked about, which, and the chief did as well, keep having a conversation with people to try to find maybe a more appropriate place for them to seek shelter. And then there is the condition that the Chief Trucillo also mentioned, which does involve the public safety, making sure that your restrooms are clean.

Hanson: I referenced the program that BART had with the elevator attendants. And then I think that, what we're seeing now is, just like the chief mentioned, they're going to get some nonsworn support. That's what you're seeing transit agencies look at. And so I think that there'll be value in the folks that have gone to mental health clinicians and crisis interventionists specials to share best practices, so we can look at what some of the key performance indicators are and not go it alone because people are in varying stages of evolving with their programs and dealing with some of the issues that happens when you do have campsites that all of a sudden have to be removed.

Hanson: And what happens when somebody that you talk to everyday is fine, and then the one day he or she is not, they've done a tremendous amount of damage to a facility or hurt somebody. So there are real challenges, but I think the keys to success are engaging with other partners, looking at whatever, engineering, lighting, bathroom maintenance, station cleaning, and then some of the enforcement and monitoring to make sure that people do follow the rules that exist for the safety of everybody.

Wolf: Well, I think you're right, we probably just scratched the surface. And yet we also covered a lot of ground. So I appreciate so much that the three of you were able to join me today on *In Practice* and share your experience and your knowledge with our listeners.

Hanson: Thank you.

Trucillo: Rob, speaking for me, I'm happy to have the opportunity.

Hester: Thank you, Rob. Myself, I'm very happy to have the opportunity as well. It's a great topic. We're very passionate here at New Jersey Transit about helping the at-risk individuals.

Wolf: I have been speaking with Polly Hanson, Senior Director of Security Risk and Emergency Management at the American Public Transportation Association; Chief Chris Trucillo, the chief of the New Jersey Transit Police; and Deputy Chief Laura Hester, who is a deputy chief at the New Jersey Transit Police. And I am Rob Wolf with the Center for Court Innovation. You can learn more about our work at www.courtinnovation.org. And this has been an episode of *In Practice*. Please consider subscribing on your favorite podcasting app, and you can also hear more episodes from practitioners who are trying to change and improve and transform the justice and legal systems to make them better, healthier, stronger for everyone. Thank you so much for listening.