

# Forum at the Forum



POLICE EXECUTIVE  
RESEARCH FORUM

## Law Enforcement and Society

Using History to Discuss the Role  
of Police in a Democracy

April 2026



# Forum at the Forum



POLICE EXECUTIVE  
RESEARCH FORUM

## Law Enforcement and Society

### Using History to Discuss the Role of Police in a Democracy

For more than 25 years, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have led police officers and recruits through deep conversations about their role in a democracy. Law Enforcement and Society (LEAS), a day-long training that takes place in the USHMM and other Holocaust museums around the country, uses photographs of German law enforcement during the Holocaust to prompt discussions about the role police played in German society then and the role of police in a democratic society more generally.

To learn more about the LEAS program, PERF spoke with some of the people who have been an integral part of its past and present.

## Origins of the Program

In 1999, a USHMM tour led Chief Charles "Chuck" Ramsey of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., to consider the role of the police during that period of German history. Chief Ramsey, who spent 30 years with the Chicago Police Department before leading the Metropolitan Police Department from 1998 to 2007 and the Philadelphia Police Department from 2008 to 2016, spoke with PERF about LEAS's origins. "In 1998, I had just come in as the new police chief in D.C. I got a letter from David Friedman, who was the executive director of the ADL in Washington at the time. He invited me to come by the Museum and meet him and others there. I was in the process of trying to meet as many people as I could to get to know Washington, and I had never been to the Holocaust Museum.

"I went on a tour, and a woman named Irene Weiss,<sup>1</sup> who is a [Holocaust] survivor, was walking through with me. I was looking at all the exhibits, and she was telling her story at the same time.

"As I went through the museum with her, we got to the one section where there's a boxcar like [those] they used to transport Jews to the concentration camps during the Holocaust. She was explaining what it was like being in one of those—how hot and crowded it was, and how they just had a bucket in a corner for people to relieve themselves.

"As you step out on the other side, there's a huge picture on the wall that shows a Nazi soldier and people who had just come off the train, who were being divided into two groups. Irene looked at the picture, pointed, and said, 'That's me right there.' She was only, I think, 11 or 12 years old at the time, and that picture was taken at just the moment that a decision was being made about whether she would get in the line here, which meant you go to work, or the line over there, which meant you went immediately to death. Her mother and younger sister got put in that [second] line, because they didn't want young children, and went right to their death.

"It was incredibly powerful. I left, but I was thinking, 'There's something I'm missing here.' I went back to the museum a week later, unannounced. I wanted to walk through on my own, at my own pace. That's when it hit me.

"One of the first pictures you see when you get off the elevator is a picture of a Nazi soldier along with a police officer. What struck me was that I never realized the police played a role at all during the Holocaust. I always thought it was just the German army and different divisions within it.

"It made me start thinking. Germany was a democracy prior to the rise of Hitler, and those police officers took an oath very similar to the one that I took. What happened? What is the role of police in a democratic society?

"At the time, we were going through a lot of controversy around stop and frisk. One of the pictures I saw was of a Jewish man with his coat wide open as soldiers searched him, taking stuff out of his pockets. It was stop and frisk. I started thinking about what that's like for the person who's being searched. It put me in a whole different mindset.

"We had been dealing with issues of police and community. We had 'sensitivity training,' which is a term I absolutely hate. The message just never got through. You'd see a bunch of cops sitting there with their arms folded, not really paying attention or listening.



1. "Irene Fogel Weiss," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed November 19, 2025, <https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-survivors/volunteers/irene-fogel-weiss>.

"The issue wasn't that. It was, 'What is the role of police in a democratic society?' If you ask the average police officer their role, they're going to say, 'Enforce the laws.' What if one day that same officer said, 'To protect the constitutional rights of all people?' Don't you think their behavior would be a little different? We weren't thinking in those terms.

"In Germany, once the police were co-opted, there was nothing standing between the community and terror—nothing at all. So the role police play in our society is so important, and there are lessons there.

"I went to David [Friedman] and gave him an outline of some of my thoughts. We brought them to the museum and I thought the staff would think I was crazy, but they didn't. We began working on a curriculum, and the first group to go through it was me and my command staff. It was a pilot.

"We didn't want to come off as if we're accusing cops of being Nazis. That's not what we're talking about. It's a way of getting at critical issues, almost through a back door. World War II was far enough in the past that certainly no one going through the academy had personally experienced it. When we had a discussion afterward, it was a backdoor way of talking about issues that are current today—profiling, stop and search, stop and frisk. We could talk about them in a nonthreatening way.

"And we talked about the important role of police in a democratic society. We can learn from the Holocaust and help police understand that their role is about more than just enforcing laws."

## The LEAS Training Today

The full-day training that Chief Ramsey, the USHMM, and the ADL developed begins with a guided tour of the museum in the morning. Students are led through the museum's exhibits with an emphasis on those that depict members of law enforcement.

Following the tour, representatives from the museum and the ADL facilitate a discussion about what the students have seen and how they perceive the core values of policing. First, students analyze and discuss photos of law enforcement actions during the Holocaust. Then the ADL facilitators lead a broad discussion about law enforcement's role in society today.

While the training has remained largely the same in the years since, there have been adjustments. "We used to have a much more facilitator-led discussion, with the facilitator asking questions of the group," Sarah Reza, Manager of Law and Justice Initiatives at the USHMM, told PERF. "Over the last couple of years, we have moved more toward group work. LEAS is based on analyzing photographs of law enforcement in Nazi Germany 'just doing their jobs.' We used to go through the photos one-by-one in class, ask questions, and people would answer. Now everyone gets the photos at their table, so they discuss them together. It really does allow, I think, more peer-to-peer learning. I think that really has been a welcome change in terms of how we get engagement from the group, and we can see that they're having really intense discussions with themselves." But the core message has stayed the same," Reza continued. "The history doesn't change, but our approach to the history changes. So the core of the program won't be different, but how people come to it and make meaning from it is the key."

Facilitators don't proactively raise more contemporary issues, but students often bring them up during the discussion. "It's their job to bring it up, whatever it is," Reza said. "Sometimes it takes them a minute, sometimes they want to talk about it right away. It's not our place to say, 'How do you feel about George Floyd? How do you feel about Ferguson?' They can tell us how they feel, but those connections aren't mine to make. Those are theirs to make."

On September 16, 2025, 23 cadets with the U.S. Capitol Police gathered in a small classroom in the museum to begin the day's training. Some have always wanted to be cops, while others chose it as a change of careers. Many are from military families. They are halfway through their police training and set to graduate three months later. On their guided tour through the museum, they are all met with the same photo of the German officer that inspired Chuck Ramsey to create the training course more than 20 years prior.



“Being here at the museum, there are a lot of new things I’ve learned—especially how it plays into my role as a police officer,” a recruit told PERF. “Before we got here, I was questioning why we were coming to the Holocaust Museum. But now I look back, and it makes a lot of sense.”

Following a post-tour debrief during which the recruits describe their initial reactions, the class reviews the photos of German officers walking aside Nazi officials, intimidating voters, and raiding Jewish neighborhoods. This is followed by a look at the changes made to the oath taken by German police after the Nazis took power. Together the class tries to imagine why an officer would swear loyalty to Adolf Hitler, citing fear of losing their job or an inability to recognize where the world was headed.

“There were cops who were put into a position during the Holocaust, and they didn’t know who to trust or what to do. I could see myself being put in that position possibly in the future—although not to that extent,” one recruit told PERF. “I think this turned out to be a really important part of our training because now I see what the extreme could be if I’m put into a situation where I have to choose between doing the right thing and doing what I’m told to keep my job.”

## Implementing LEAS in Washington, D.C.: Lessons from the U.S. Capitol Police

Alexandra Athanasatos-Elder, Associate Director of Law Enforcement Professional Development at the ADL, told PERF that LEAS remains part of the recruit training program for the Metropolitan Police Department, and several other agencies in the Washington, D.C., area have implemented it as well. She said that other agencies, such as the Delaware State Police, New Jersey State Police, and University of Pennsylvania Police Department, drive from farther away so their recruits can experience the LEAS training at the USHMM.

To learn more about how the program is implemented in practice, PERF spoke with Captain Jillian Jeffers from the U.S. Capitol Police and observed as some of her agency's recruits went through the training at the USHMM.

While the Metropolitan Police Department has been putting its officers through the LEAS training for nearly three decades, the U.S. Capitol Police implemented it more recently. "Since October of 2022, we have had a relationship with the training," Captain Jeffers said. "As we were starting to come out of COVID, a lot of it was virtual. We have since been able to go back in person.

"It's valuable training," Captain Jeffers continued. "It's looking through the lens of something that, as we get further away from it, we're not immersed in it. We were probably taught it in school, then when you stand in the Holocaust Memorial and see people's spoons and luggage and shoes, it brings it home."

Captain Jeffers told PERF that she occasionally hears negative feedback from trainees who feel the training is too long or doesn't apply to their work because they're "here to be cops." However, Captain Jeffers said, "Nine times out of 10, it's very—I don't know if I would use the word positive. It's more impactful."

"The other part of the Holocaust Museum is the fact that Holocaust survivors, for many years, were there as docents," she added. "They were doing the tour, or they were sitting as you come past the check-in desk. They would sit there and just chat with you and share their experiences. When you can put a human being into the equation, the impact increases."

The final portion of the day's training, "The Challenge of Policing Today," connects the historical lessons of the Holocaust with the challenges of modern policing. Recruits discuss the stereotypes surrounding policing and are asked how they wish community members to see them in the profession.



*“As someone who cares.”*

*“A provider for the community.”*

*“Brave.”*

*“Reliable.”*

*“Trustworthy.”*

*“Empathetic.”*

Trainers then remind the recruits that during the course of their duties, they will often encounter combative individuals who may be at their lowest point. These individuals may have a history of negative experiences with police and may view them with hostility.

As these interactions begin to pile up, even those who entered the profession with the most idealistic attitude can find it tarnished. Over time, the way officers view the public can change. Some may develop an “us versus them” mentality, which dehumanizes those the police are sworn to protect. This lesson is especially poignant as recruits recall the injustices German officers committed that they had been examining earlier in the day.

Trainers remind recruits that the quality of an encounter with an officer is one of the strongest factors associated with how a community member perceives the police. And by maintaining core values—such as empathy, trustworthiness, and seeing (and treating) every individual as a human being—officers can avoid abusing their power.

While recruits who participate in the training may enter with a sense of apprehension, that concern largely vanishes over the course of the day. As troubling as the actions of the German officers highlighted in the session are, the lessons taken from the training remind participants of the important role police play in a democracy.

“The big takeaway from the day is us visiting the museum and being able to speak about what we saw. Everybody comes from a different background, and this presentation allows us to understand that we are all wanting the same outcome with officers and the public. We want to communicate effectively while getting the job done,” one recruit told PERF. “When you respond to a call, you’re not just there to show authority, but also be respectful and let them know that you wear the badge; the badge doesn’t wear you. At the end of the day, you’re still a human being, and you know how to make people feel heard while also doing your job.”



# Implementing LEAS outside Washington, D.C.— Lessons from the Tampa Police Department

Agencies outside the Washington, D.C., region have implemented the LEAS program with their local Holocaust museums and the ADL. According to the USHMM and ADL, local Holocaust museums in Houston, Texas;<sup>2</sup> Nassau County, New York;<sup>3</sup> Seattle, Washington;<sup>4</sup> St. Louis, Missouri;<sup>5</sup> and St. Petersburg, Florida,<sup>6</sup> have been trained to teach this program and currently instruct some local law enforcement agencies.

PERF spoke with Tampa police chief Lee Bercaw about the training his agency conducts with the ADL and the Florida Holocaust Museum. Chief Bercaw said his agency's LEAS program began when the city's current mayor, Jane Castor, was the police chief. "Chuck Ramsey told Jane Castor about it," Chief Bercaw told PERF. "She was so impressed by it, and asked how we could bring this to Tampa. She met with the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg and the ADL, and she brought the D.C. curriculum to Florida."

Chief Bercaw was a captain when the Tampa Police Department first implemented the program in 2013, and members of the command staff were the first to go through the training. "I went through that program and was very impacted by it," Chief Bercaw said. "It's amazing to hear the stories and see it firsthand. I haven't been to the museum in D.C., but I would imagine some of the artifacts and exhibits are very similar. At the Florida Holocaust Museum, they have one of the train cars. They're telling you the story of the train car and you're sitting there seeing it. It becomes so real that you can actually visually put yourself there."

The program has continued steadily for more than a decade. "Since then, every new police officer has gone through it," he said. "After they go to the police academy, we hire them, and we do six to eight weeks of in-house training before they go to their field training program. Part of that is a half day at the Florida Holocaust Museum going over this curriculum. There's a tour and a video, then a discussion at the end where they come back and reflect on what they've seen."

The Tampa Police Department is now implementing a refresher training. "I've been chief now for about three years," Chief Bercaw continued. "Two years ago, we did our first ever refresher training. I had all our commanders go back and do it. I was thinking, 'It's been a long time since we went through it. Let's do a refresher.' The museum was closed for a year to bring on some new exhibits and expand. It just reopened, so we're going to go back and—not do an entire refresher, but see the new exhibits and hear the stories behind them. There's a particular boat they have that was used to help people escape, and I'm interested to go in to see that and hear the stories behind that."

Chief Bercaw recommended that agencies implementing the training start with their leadership teams. "Anything like that has to start at the top, and get the buy-in from the command staff," he said. "That's what we did here."

He also recommended agencies that have been doing the training for a while do a refresher training, as Tampa has. "I would strongly encourage that refresher, because when was the last time you did it? Ten years ago? Five years ago?" he asked. "What were you at that time? You may not have been in executive management; you may have been in first-line supervision. You'll see it from a different perspective."

---

2. "Law Enforcement and Society," Holocaust Museum Houston, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://hnh.org/education/programs-and-curriculum/law-enforcement-and-society/>.

3. "Law Enforcement," Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center of Nassau County, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.hmtcli.org/law-enforcement>.

4. "Law Enforcement and Society," Holocaust Center for Humanity, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://holocaustcenterseattle.org/programs-events/law-enforcement-and-society-leas>.

5. "Law Enforcement and Society: Lessons of the Holocaust," St. Louis Kaplan Feldman Holocaust Museum, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://stlholocaustmuseum.org/programs/annual-events/law-enforcement-society/>.

6. "Law Enforcement and Society," The Florida Holocaust Museum, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.thefhm.org/for-educators/law-enforcement-and-society/>.

# Related Programs

Sarah Reza of the USHMM said her organization recently developed a related training for agencies that may not have a local Holocaust museum or be able to bring in ADL representatives to facilitate discussions in person. “We created another program, called Defining Moments in Policing, that we use with departments that don’t have a local ADL office,” Reza said. “It’s written as a fully out-of-the-box facilitator script. Someone can pick it up and do it. You don’t have to be a historian. You don’t even have to have a Holocaust center near you. We sort of felt there was a gap, because there needs to be a Holocaust center and an ADL office kind of close by for the LEAS training.”

According to the USHMM, “The Defining Moments in Policing: Ethical Decision-Making during the Holocaust program enables participants to critically examine the role of choice and decision-making by police during the Nazi era, using a case study of police action during Kristallnacht.”<sup>7</sup> The training is approximately 2–2.5 hours long.

Over the course of the training, instructors discuss the changing role of policing before and after the Nazis’ rise to power and the effect of new antisemitic legislation during that time. Participants then examine police reactions to the order not to intervene during the Kristallnacht attacks and explore the possible reasons or explanations for those reactions. Following this exercise, the class will walk away with an understanding of how the changing context of policing under the Nazis contributed to police inaction during Kristallnacht and consider the implications of this case study for their work in the modern day.



7. “Law Enforcement,” United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.ushmm.org/outreach-programs/law-enforcement>.

Chief Ramsey told PERF he thinks agencies could implement training programs that use lessons from other periods of history. "You can find places where that same thing can be done," Chief Ramsey said. "It doesn't have to be the Holocaust Museum. I was in Kansas City. I went through a museum for the old Negro Leagues baseball,<sup>8</sup> and I thought, 'There's a story there.' At that time, baseball was segregated, and the segregation went beyond baseball to include laws that treated Blacks unequally. They couldn't sleep in certain hotels. They couldn't eat in certain places. The laws were enforced by the police. And that segregation and unequal treatment has not been forgotten, and has led to distrust of the police in many communities of color.

"Through history we learn," Chief Ramsey continued. "You weren't alive then, so you can't take personal offense to it. Because it isn't about you. It's about the profession you're in and the history associated with it, and it wasn't always positive. By using history and the museum as a backdrop, you can open the door for a discussion about building trust and legitimacy in communities of color."



Photos by Dustin Waters

8. "About," Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, accessed November 19, 2025, <https://www.nlbm.com/about/>.