

CRIME S.C.E.N.E. EXCELLENCE **PODCAST**



Episode Four

Notification, Note Taking, and Neighborhood Canvassing

Introduction:

The National Public Safety Partnership presents the Crime S.C.E.N.E. Excellence Podcast Episode Four: Notification, Note Taking, and Neighborhood Canvassing. And now retired Lieutenant Floyd Wiley welcomes John Jackson, retired sergeant from the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department to discuss notification, note taking, and neighborhood canvassing in the fourth of five podcasts on Crime S.C.E.N.E. Excellence.

Floyd Wiley:

Floyd Wiley here from the Institute for Intergovernmental Research. This is the fourth of five podcasts of which we will be discussing the critical elements when responding and managing major crime scenes. We're going to cover the fourth letter, N, of our S.C.E.N.E. acronym of the Crime S.C.E.N.E. Excellence concept. In this segment, we will discuss N for notification or notifications, note taking, and neighborhood canvassing.

For this discussion, we are privileged to have Sergeant John Jackson, retired from the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department after 31 years. He supervised the homicide cold-case squad and a police shooting team and the hostage negotiations team. It is important to note that during John's tenure as cold-case squad supervisor, he led a team in solving three separate serial investigations within the Kansas City metropolitan area.

He has instructed homicide cold-case operations, interview interrogation, evaluating crime scenes, the investigative roles and responsibilities associated with violent crimes, the importance of documentation, and the protection of evidence, and most importantly, the pitfalls encountered in working with witnesses. Upon his retirement, John accepted a position as Senior Investigator and Acting Director of Public Safety for the largest public housing organization in the metropolitan Kansas City area.

He continues to train new investigators and is responsible for any criminal investigations within the public housing domain. John, thanks for joining us today.

John Jackson:

Hey Floyd, nice to be here.

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Floyd Wiley: John, I want to pull from your vast experience by starting off our discussion on notifications when navigating the initial response to a violent crime scene, then we'll work our way to the importance of note taking, and then we'll finish off this segment with the neighborhood canvassing. Does that sound good to you?

John Jackson: That sounds great, Floyd. That's a lot of good information to get into.

Floyd Wiley: Great. So on notifications, talk to me, John.

John Jackson: Well Floyd, you can think back to the many years that you were in the field and that I was in the field and many officers have spent in the field. And the initial response to a crime scene is extremely hectic. You have any number of officers that are dispatched to that scene. You have neighbors, you have, of course, the media's interference. A lot of things can influence what happens on that initial response.

You're going to have the primary officer, that first dispatched officer who will be responsible for not only completing the report but notifying the necessary people of this incident. And it's extremely difficult to focus in on that. So, let's just start at the very beginning. That officer's going to get to the scene and make every attempt to stabilize that scene with officer safety and witness safety as the primary mission of that initial response.

And once things are slowed down a little bit, a little more calm, and that officer has a chance to make an evaluation, he has to decide who he needs to notify, in what order he needs to notify, and get the proper people on-scene as quickly and as safely as possible. Generally, you will see an initial officer will notify their sergeant, if the sergeant is not dispatched to the scene.

With staffing levels in many agencies, you have sergeants that are spread pretty thin throughout their squad, their district, or however they're divided up. So that officer would get his sergeant on the way because the sergeant will have to make many of the notifications that are necessary in a major crime scene.

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Floyd Wiley:

So if they don't have a sergeant or say, for instance, there was a different type of structure within the organization, would it be prudent just to make sure whoever the supervisor is or whoever the acting sergeant is should be responding to the scene? Does that make sense?

John Jackson:

That's absolutely correct. An initial officer responding to a scene will have some sort of a supervisory person that he needs to make an initial notification to. So, for the purposes of this discussion, we'll just use a sergeant. The officer will request that his sergeant respond to the scene. And once this sergeant's there, then he begins a process of briefing his sergeant on what he saw when he first got there and whether the scene is safe, whether there are resources are needed immediately, such as paramedics, fire department, any kind of rescue teams, whatever might be needed immediately to that scene.

That sergeant will then kind of take the reins and evaluate what information he's been given. And then the sergeant begins to make his notifications. And most generally, first person he's going to call is his boss, whether it be a captain or lieutenant or whatever their rank structure is, who will then begin to make their notifications. But the importance of all of these notifications is clear and concise information.

That sergeant needs to know manpower. How many officers are at the scene? How many officers does he think he'll need? Are there areas that are being secured by a patrol officer that might be better served with a traffic officer, such as intersections, things along that line? That sergeant's got a lot of decisions to make before he even picks up the phone to call his boss. And of course we know that once he notifies his boss, it's going to trickle up the chain of command to whoever the highest-ranking person is that needs to be made aware of this particular situation.

Once these notifications are made from the patrol officer to the sergeant, the sergeant can then look into what resources does he need to call in, making the notification to the proper investigative unit, ordering maybe different resources that he has the ability to call. Once that sergeant notifies those investigators, they will begin the process of evaluating the information and determining how many resources they need to have respond to the scene to begin the investigation, such as crime scene investigators, coroner's office or, just depending on the situation, what resources those investigators will need.

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Floyd Wiley: So pretty much in a nutshell, that's the way or a way to make sure that we don't lose anything, nothing slips through the cracks in other words, when it comes down to notifications on a crime scene. Would you agree?

John Jackson: That's right, Floyd. That's exactly it. And to be perfectly clear, there's always something that slips through the cracks. It's just the way it goes. And officers have to act on that information as soon as they're made aware of it and then take the initiative to pass that information on to the proper people.

Floyd Wiley: So let's move on to another portion of this. And let's talk about the note taking and how critical that is, not only in constructing a well-detailed report but also passing on information to your supervision, to your investigators, and also maintaining those professional notes.

John Jackson: Those professional notes are a thing that can come back to haunt an officer years down the road. So, most officers have their handy-dandy pocket notebook, and they pull that thing out and they start writing notes down, victim's name, maybe a witness, direction of travel of the suspect, suspect description, things such as that. And they're going to use those notes to write their report, and that's great. But maybe a year, two years down the road when this thing all goes to trial, those notes could very well be subpoenaed into court.

And what you do not want is those notes to come in with the order for your girlfriend's flowers or what all your buddies wanted for lunch or who drew the short straw to go to the local convenience store to get a soda. So it's very important that officers maintain that notebook as a professional document. We've all made that mistake of handing the piece of paper to write this down on, write something down on a piece of paper, and it may not be the most appropriate thing.

But officers need to maintain professionalism of that notebook and be sure they're aware of that. Concise notes will help you later on when you have to sit down and write that detailed report from your initial crime scene report. So that's another reason those notes need to be clear and concise. I've written notes down in my notebook and two hours later, I'm looking at it and I'm saying, "What did I write here? What do I mean by this?"

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Floyd Wiley: Right. And the other thing that I always looked at was making sure that we took those accurate notes to make sure we can pass it off to your supervisor, all the detailed information, victim, suspect, everything that was pertinent so you can try to keep from having those gaps in information. And like you said, keeping that notebook, shoot, I can tell you I've maintained those and put them in boxes for years and years. Because you just never know, not only just for this case but also for some other information that may pop up in the future that you can kind of tie an individual to.

John Jackson: That's correct, Floyd. I can't remember a court case where I testified that one of the first few questions a defense attorney asked me is "Detective, do you have your notes that you took from the scene?" Once you produce those notes, they become part of that case file. They become evidence. So, maintain that clear, concise, professional notebook.

Floyd Wiley: So, and obviously making sure we do not throw them away. So, let's move on to neighborhood canvassing and the importance of that when we're navigating through this initial response. How important is that neighborhood canvassing?

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John Jackson:

Neighborhood canvassing is very important, and yet it's one of the most difficult tasks that a field officer or an investigator will have. You have to take a professional demeanor to each and every person you talk to and solicit from them in a comfortable fashion—and I'll come back to that in just a second—any information that they may have that they can share with you or will share with you.

Over the last several years, we've worked through this "snitches get stitches" thing, and it has become increasingly difficult to find neighbors, witnesses, family members that will speak to you. That officer has to go to them as a professional because he's either wearing, he or she is either wearing a police uniform or maybe a suit and tie or maybe a polo shirt with a big badge on the chest. But make no mistake about it, that's a law enforcement official that's coming to their door. So that officer has to be professional.

But yet you have to empathize with what these people are going through by living in the neighborhood and make them feel comfortable in information that they share with you. This is their neighborhood. They need to take some control of what's going on. But many neighbors are afraid because if they tell you something and it gets back that they said it, there may be repercussions that they have to face.

So as a professional, you have to talk to these people, make them feel comfortable, make them understand the importance of sharing whatever information they may have in order for this perpetrator to be taken off the streets. Because it's their neighborhood. They need to feel safe. And that's very difficult.

I want to stress we've had a recent string of officers being assaulted as they merely approach the residents. So, I want to stress that when officers and detectives are doing these area canvasses, number one priority is officer safety. You have to be aware of your surroundings at all times. These area canvasses sometimes can get real boring, knocking on the door, writing down their name, writing down their phone number, and getting the same story: "I didn't see anything."

But then you knock on that one door that that guy has had a bad experience with a police officer and it goes south real bad. So, you need to maintain vigilance of your surroundings.

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Floyd Wiley:

Hey John, on that note, I think you're hitting on a key point addressing safety doing the neighborhood canvass. Because you don't know when you knock on the door what circumstance may befall you totally unrelated to your neighborhood canvass, especially when you're in a nonpermissive environment. Officers need to maintain the same caution as they do when they respond to any critical incident, and making sure that you don't stand in front of the door, also known as the fatal funnel.

When you knock on a door, your best option may be to retreat to an area of safety. You need to have a heightened level of situational awareness, which we call intentional awareness. Know where your last area of hard cover is located. You should be aware of that during your approach. Push your vision out and up for 540 degrees of visual coverage and avoid tunnel vision and complacency.

John Jackson:

Absolutely. I want to go back to the clear and concise notes for just a second. Because when you contact those witnesses, you want to get as much information from them as you can. And then you want to have a way to recontact them. If it's an officer contacting them or the original investigator contacting them, make sure your notes show the full name, telephone number, any contact number, as much information as we can get from that witness. Because the chances are very good that they will be recontacted. There'll be more information that will come up later in an investigation that could make that witness the key witness in your entire investigation.

Floyd Wiley:

And speaking of gathering information, just like you said, when you make contact with some of these people who may not want to talk to you on-scene, they may be willing to give you a phone number and you can call them later and conduct that interview over the phone. So, don't leave that out if the person says, "Hey, look, I don't want to talk to you right here." Try to gather some information and say, "Hey, can I call you on the phone?" Maybe they'll give you a phone number.

So let's go into like when we're doing these neighborhood canvasses, some of the things that are common where we see that certain houses have not been contacted or whether or not sometimes say, "Hey, look, nobody answered" and we just kind of walk away or whether it is a weather condition that slows down the process. Let's talk about that and how important it is to follow up and make those contacts.

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John Jackson:

Well, I have a good example to go along with that too. Years back, working at a murder investigation, and this particular sergeant that I was working for, he just drilled it in about area canvasses, and our area canvasses would get bigger and bigger and bigger because we'd get frustrated that we weren't getting any information. And so we'd go back and we'd recontact every household that the first investigators did not get a response.

On our third trip through the neighborhood, we knocked on a door and an individual came to the door and you could tell was extremely nervous and hesitant to talk to us. All the bells and whistles went off of why is this person that way? So we convinced this person to let us take his picture and throw him into a blind array photo spread. And lo and behold, this was the suspect in our murder and he lived three doors down from the victim.

So, it is very important to keep hammering those area canvasses. And I know as a detective or as a district officer, it's probably one of the most frustrating things you do, but it's also one of the most important things you do. So, keep good notes and go back to those residences that you didn't contact. Recontact somebody if you just didn't feel right about them.

Floyd Wiley:

You know what else, John? When we talk about keeping those good notes, I want to just have the audience hear just a little bit about that serial killer incident, the note taking you were able to piece things back together. Can you kind of share that with them?

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John Jackson:

It was a situation where you had a new set of eyes looking at old case files and old notes. And these guys back in the day, they maybe didn't know what they were getting, but they got a lot of important information and they kept good notes. When you put the new eyes reviewing a case file and you start coming up with some new things you want to follow up on, that's what happened in Kansas City.

We had a gentleman, he was a trash man. And so he would go through the neighborhoods and locate these potential victims, and then when the opportunity struck, he would get them to come with him. And before long, he had murdered them, and he would always pose these people. Most of them were prostitutes, and as they started talking among themselves—the other prostitutes—and they started sharing information with the investigators, it kept coming out: “Everybody watch out for that trash man. He's spooky.”

Well, it turned out that 13 women we were able to make a case on. We don't believe that he was done when we got the last one, because his position with the trash company had changed from riding on the back of the truck to being a supervisor, where he followed the trash truck and picked up anything that they missed. And so he drove directly to the dump. There's a strong belief there were other victims and that's how he disposed of those other victims.

The notes that those investigators and those officers took 15 to 20 years ago became very, very important, current day, with new technologies available, follow the notes, follow the evidence, led us to a suspect. It was very beneficial the notes that those officers took back in the day.

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Floyd Wiley:

Those of you that are listening, this is extremely important information. We're talking about our notifications. We're talking about note taking. We're talking about neighborhood canvassing. It's important to be ambassadors of crime scene investigation when we go out on each and every scene. Don't take this as a mundane routine with law enforcement. You really can make a huge difference with some of the small details that you come across. And the professional practices that you use each and every single time were at a crime scene.

I want to thank John for taking the time to speak with us today. I want to encourage all of our listeners to visit the Public Safety Partnership website at www.nationalpublicsafetypartnership.org for more information on this topic and other Public Safety Partnership topics.



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