

Former finest want cops

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JIM SLEEPER

Somewhere near the heart of the NYPD's crisis of corruption and morale lies a simple truth: Ultimately, loyalty to your partner comes

second to loyalty to the mission that bonded you in the first place: to protect the city, its neighborhoods and its children.

Only when that stops meaning anything does the "blue wall of silence" become truly impenetrable. The problem of corruption isn't just that cops are reluctant to snitch on other cops. It's that, for some, there's no sense of mission stronger than the admirable reluctance to snitch.

The meaning of being a cop has become overgrown by a cover-your-butt mentality that turns the system of incentives and punishments taught in the Police Academy upside down. That demoralizes good cops and sets the stage for corruption itself. Here's an example of the problem and some news about NYPD alumni who are going to do something about it.

A cop recently wrote me of a day years ago when, as an idealistic rookie, he arrived at his precinct to find a veteran officer in "silver bracelets." The Internal Affairs Division had caught the man dealing drugs while on duty, and he looked stunned and ashamed. But to the rookie's surprise, that wasn't how some of his fellow officers looked.

"We rookies were told, 'If you don't contribute to the defense fund for him, we'll put your name up on the bulletin board.' To most people in the command, the IAD cops were rats and scum. . . . They couldn't

admit that IAD did its job and that the arrested cop was scum."

There, in a nutshell, is the problem. The "blue wall" isn't a wall. It's an active, high-pressure front that engulfs and devours any cop who tries to live by the rules.

Long before a cop even thinks of stealing or dealing, he or she learns that "the job isn't on the level." Assignments and promotions are decided on the basis of whom you know, what favors you've done

The strongest sense of 'mission' is a reluctance to snitch.

and — as your web of mutual debts expands — whether you can be counted on to look the other way. The spectacle of cops raising money for an officer who was caught red-handed disgracing them is a symptom, not the disease.

Call the disease Dominick Corso Syndrome, after a City Councilman who said years ago, "You think it takes guts to stand up for what is right? That doesn't take guts. What takes guts is to stand up for what you know is wrong, day after day."

Sure, rules are made to be broken. Good commanders apply the Patrol Guide flexibly to motivate officers. Demoralization sets in only when leaders use rules capriciously, to punish officers for reasons having nothing to do with performance and everything to do with internal politics.

Enter the Concerned Alliance for Professional Policing. It's a group of ex-NYPD investigators, supervisors and mid-

dle managers. Most were Police Academy instructors. Most have graduate degrees. Now they're private-sector executives, managers or self-employed business people. In May they'll finalize CAPP's bylaws, elect a nine-member governing board and reach out to Police Commissioner William Bratton, who most of them think is off to a good start.

What will CAPP do? "We're not just here to cheer for alma mater," says a founder. "We want to help the department dig deeper into itself in terms of being on the level. We want to end the theater of the absurd where top brass and union leaders routinely get three-quarter tax-free disability pensions. Demoralization starts right there."

"We want to help cops outside Internal Affairs get involved in investigations. The approach to corruption has always been, 'It's not your job, leave it to us.' But precinct commanders and supervisors should be involved in investigations, especially the ones they initiate."

That would help breach the blue wall.

WE ALSO WANT to increase public awareness of when the NYPD is rendered ineffective by politicians, district attorneys and others in the criminal justice system," the spokesman says. "A police commissioner can't just criticize a DA or a judge. We can."

CAPP also will support community policing and child-protection and youth-development programs.

These ex-cops, whom I've met twice, can't stop thinking and caring about the department they left behind. There could be no finer tribute to the sometimes-forgotten mission of New York's Finest. We'll be hearing more from them soon.

TRUE AND BLUE

Columnist Jim Sleeper writes of an organization of former members of the NYPD who are concerned about maintaining and improving standards of integrity in the department.

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