

Carrie Hanson.: Hello, and welcome to the first audio cast of our new series, racial and social injustice continuing the conversation. My name is Carrie Hanson. I'm the editor of Public Management Magazine for the International City/County Management Association. Joining me is Valerie Lemmie. Valerie, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

Valerie Lemmie.: No, it's my pleasure.

Carrie Hanson.: Valerie is currently the director of exploratory research for the Kettering Foundation and she's a former city manager of Cincinnati, Ohio. Given everything that's happening in the world, the civil unrest [00:00:30] and the demand for racial justice that we see across the globe. ICMA recently published a special supplement to PM magazine called moments of change, leading with courage and commitment for racial and social justice. So Valerie wrote an article in the supplement titled fostering economic inclusion, social equity and justice for people of color advice for city managers.

Now, Valerie you were city manager of Cincinnati during a time of significant civil unrest, and this was following the death of Timothy Thomas who was shot and killed by police on [00:01:00] April 7th, 2001. And in the article, you talk about how the city erupted in protests and at the time it was the largest urban disturbance since the 1993 riots in LA. So I wanted to speak with you today to get more insight into your experience as city manager during that time and what you envision for the future. So starting off in one of the lessons learned that you mentioned in the article, you say that while outside expertise is critical, so is help from those who live and work in the community. And you go on to mention Cincinnati [00:01:30] CAN, C-A-N, which was a series of task forces and committees. And can you tell me more about Cincinnati CAN and how it got started?

Valerie Lemmie.: Absolutely. Cincinnati CAN is an acronym for Community Action Now, and in response to the demands which grew out of the riot in April of 2001, Mayor Charlie Luken formed the Community Action Now, or group, which was a three member committee dedicated to addressing concerns about racial [00:02:00] injustice, social equity, and economic inclusion. It was privately funded, and I think that's a really important key. And the three chairs were well known business and civic leaders, including one of the civic leaders was a minister and founder of an organization called Black United Front, which had a lawsuit against the city alleging racial profiling by police. So this was a group that didn't shy away from including [00:02:30] people that had different perspectives, business leaders, civic leaders and those who were willing to be very active and vocal in expressing the concerns they had with the way of life in Cincinnati was lived by people of color.

To continue, there were six task forces that were created to address what was at the time termed the root causes of the unrest, and they were education and youth development, [00:03:00] economic inclusion, police and the justice

system, housing and neighborhood development, image and media and healthcare and human services. And it is interesting, this was in 2001, 2002. I joined the city in 2002. It's interesting to me how many of these same issues are in the forefront today and I'm pleased time [inaudible 00:03:24] to talk little bit about what some of the ultimate accomplishments were of out of these various [00:03:30] task forces. But I think that the key work and understanding Cincinnati CAN is that two things. One was, well I guess I mentioned the private funding. Two a recognition by the entire community that the structural issues and challenges and problems the city face were not going to be resolved overnight.

These were not quick fix issues, these were systemic. These were in many instances historic, and they were what we call [00:04:00] at the foundation wicked problems that were going to require as many people in the community as possible to work on. And that was the most, I think dynamic part of the work of Cincinnati CAN, is that it involved hundreds of volunteers across the city, working together with public officials to address shared community problems. And importantly, the city was not at the center of this work and I know for city managers, oftentimes when demands are made [00:04:30] you feel as though you have to go in and do the work. And what we learned in Cincinnati is that the work would be done it's best done by the community collectively with the city, not at the center but being an important and an integral partner and the city manager learning how to use his or her [inaudible 00:04:49] to help organize and clarify crystallized issues, from a public government perspective but to utilize the resources and the civic [00:05:00] advocacy and business community, as a way of engaging again, as many people as is possible.

And in Cincinnati, it was the first time in memory that citizens took responsibility for deciding what needed to be done, to make Cincinnati a city that was welcoming to all. And I think that was the power of the work that was done by that group and their offshoots that can be seen today in youth education and a commitment to [00:05:30] ensure that every child that is born in the city of Cincinnati has access to high quality education and childcare, healthcare resources that there's training and development available, that parents have the opportunity for an excellent education for their children, and they have the choice about what that education looks like and where that education might be.

Other examples, I think include the importance of communications among [00:06:00] the residents and business leaders in government that had been nonexistent before, those sectors just didn't talk to one another and if they did, it was through an intermediary, CAN created the space for those conversations [inaudible 00:06:14] places directly. Community resources supported the work to be done. Of course, government has a role and responsibility, but it's not the only resource that are there. Volunteers donated hundreds of hours of time to work through challenges and issues. [00:06:30] And that value was really important, I think that they continued work of the organization way past the

time when the lawsuits had ended, police practices had been reasonably revised and what other situations would be normally with people go back to normal. The work of CAN continued and I think that was an important asset for the city.

The culture of community learning was also developed. It is amazing [00:07:00] the power of communities coming together and learning and created a process where they can work together on issues. And once they worked on childcare issues, they then say well, we did that, we can do kind of the healthcare issues and we can focus on how we can leverage public and private dollars for economic inclusion programs and initiatives and for market rate housing and lots of other initiatives and opportunities that were important to people who lived and worked in Cincinnati. [00:07:30] Is this an easy work? I don't want to by any means, say when people come together, work as easy. There was learning to be done and people had to learn how to identify and recognize the tension.

They had to talk through the trade offs, not everything everybody wanted to do is available, affordable or appropriate, but how do you come to what is called common ground or public judgment. How do you reach a decision about what makes the most sense for the most people and is the best use of public [00:08:00] and private resources could be done. And so deliberating, what we're willing to do, what we can live with, how we can make a difference and citizens agreeing on not only the work that could be done to make their communities better, but the work they were going to do as well to make their communities better.

So citizens and business and civic organizations and government co-produced solutions to share to community problems. And importantly, it helped build trust among the various [00:08:30] individuals and organizations that participated as well as trust in the local government, the ability to work with the larger community wicked problems and to do their job in the ways that encourage civic participation and what is called complimentary public acting, are lots of people coming together to work on a shared problem.

Carrie Hanson.: Wow, that's amazing how something so tragic and can really bring the community together for something that's positive in the end. [00:09:00] So in the article, you mentioned the importance of clear communication during an after a crisis like the Timothy Thomas shooting. Communication with the public, with the press with city council members. Can you talk more about the importance of communication and some important things that city managers should bear in mind?

Valerie Lemmie.: Of course, I think the most important thing is to recognize that the job of city manager today is very different from the job 20, 30, 40 years ago, where you pretty much focused on what happened [00:09:30] in City Hall. And the elected officials were expected to be the voice in the community of City Hall. Today, the managers too, have to have relationships in the community. There's a saying

that a good manager walks around and I believe that's true. And I also believe it means that a good manager walks not only in City Hall, but it walks the city as well.

They could be an organized event with elected officials mayor's walk or council [00:10:00] member district walks, or it could simply be a venue where you make sure that you are showing up at community venues where it's appropriate and you might even ask to speak and say I'm here to listen, I'm here to learn, I'm here to understand because it's knowing how the community names and understands its issues, its challenges, its problem, how they talk about it, the words they use, because they're not likely to use the word professional Jews and the way they see [00:10:30] those problems manifested and then how they see others can help them and resolving them.

And the work that a city manager can do with a community to help a problem early on is going to be much more effective than a problem exploding, and suddenly you're going in after the fact and trying to fix something that is just unmanageable and out of control at the moment. There's an organization that is a part of the Ohio State University's [00:11:00] law school, and it's called the Divided Cities Project. And I know many managers have been involved in some of their early work. They have a book out that talks about the work that you might need to do the infrastructure, the groundwork, if you will, that you need to build the relationships you need to build with people.

So there is a level of trust as a city manager, I went to cities that I didn't grow up in where I didn't know anyone before I took the job. And the most important thing I understood [00:11:30] about my role was that the employees and citizens, quite frankly, even elected officials, I was only going to get so far based on my job title. The real difference was that they had trust and confidence that I would be fair, that I would work hard, that I would hear the voices of others and that I would try to find common ground solutions to the problems before us, to build trust, because it was that trust that when there was a problem, the benefit of the doubt was given to me rather [00:12:00] than not.

And in many instances that really kind of for the government anyway, saved the day that we were able to figure it out issues before they became a huge problem and work together on shared community solutions. And so it's a challenge because you still expect to do all the work that you have to do in city hall, which is why it's important to recognize the distinction between how much as a manager you lead and how much you manage the day- [00:12:30] to-day and how much the rest of the staff you have in the organization do both of those. You've got to hire good staff, have good staff, train good staff, support good staff, so that they can manage more of the day-to-day so that you can lead both in city hall, in the community as appropriate for a city manager around those needs and resources that involve community challenges and issues.

Carrie Hanson.: Wow. Yeah, that's great. So one [00:13:00] of the hypothetical questions you pose in your article is how can the past influence the way public resources are prioritized and allocated? And it's hard to know what this answer will be, but what do you envision or what do you hope to see?

Valerie Lemmie.: I think it starts in, and I had a conversation interestingly enough, just the other day with Shane Cavanaugh at the GFOA, the Government Finance Officers Association and he was working on a guide to assist financial officials in sort of [00:13:30] rethinking how they might put together a budget and I shared these comments with him and others as well. But I think part of it is to move away from historically, the notion of rather than giving departments an annual mark, how much more or less money they had and then building the budget based on what they had done historically, thinking more about the challenges that a community might be facing in this case, we could talk about police budgeting because [00:14:00] that is so much on the minds and the comments that we hear from protests and others that are responding to the concerns of the protestors and the movement of change and justice and think about how you might interrogate how the police spend their funds.

And we know about salaries and benefits and training and equipment, but where are there opportunities to leverage police expenditures? And well if you think about, what is the work we want police to do [00:14:30] and historically, we want the police to be providers of public safety. We saw them as peace officers, not as an invading force [inaudible 00:00:14:43]. And so if we think about police officers as peace officials now, what are the kinds of things that we can also help them do through the budget that reinforces the policing peace role, the public safety [00:15:00] role, the collective community responsibility, rather than just police as an enforcement role. And so what are the opportunities to partner with fire and EMS and the health department on certain kinds of responses, say mental health responses, so that it's not just the [inaudible 00:15:19] that police have to be able to make an arrest, but in fact, we might look at the softer skills that may be more appropriate in certain circumstances.

And quite frankly, I [00:15:30] think the police would love to tell the manager and elected officials what some of those places might be so that they in fact can have a better and stronger relationship with the police and the right people are responding to the nature and the kinds of calls that are needed, how we train and deploy 911 resources. Police respond to not generally the call that comes in from a citizen, they respond to the dispatcher. And how is the dispatcher naming [00:16:00] and framing the problem he, or she heard on the call and how does that influence who is in fact called to respond to what is going on in the [inaudible 00:16:10]. And so I think if we look at sort of what is it that we want to see police do today, and how can we deploy our financial resources to support that peacekeeping, that community partner, that safety as a shared responsibility among many, and not just an enforcement role by the police

[00:16:30] department, that that could begin to help us change things and involving people again in processes.

Now we hear a lot about participatory budgeting, and I think that's great anytime citizens have an opportunity to engage with institutions, but giving people X amount of money to compete against one another for a community service is one thing and another opportunity is to have people talk more specifically about, well, what are some of the concerns they have about police [00:17:00] and how might these concerns be alleviated and what kind of ways can you feel that the police are partnering with you on issues? One of the things I felt really important when I was a city manager, as I've said, police community relations have been tense. 20 years ago in many communities, urban communities in particular as well was to make sure that there were opportunities for the police interact with the residents in the community outside of an enforcement problem.

So whenever we [00:17:30] had a festival or a public venue, the police band would play. Police officers would be there, not in an enforcement role, but in a let me talk to you about what I do role. Let me introduce myself to you. Let me know who you are. I also felt it was important for police not to just [inaudible 00:17:47] the practices, and procedures, and policies of making an arrest, but they had to know community values and the best place to hear that in the Academy was from me as the manager, the mayor, and the members of the [00:18:00] city council. We are the people I felt who could talk about the community expectations, what we were going to be looking for out of our police officers, and I saw that as a nice complement to the tangible and specific work and training they needed to be, and to have as officers.

Now I always felt if I saw a police officer on the street, he or she should come up to me and say hello, because they should know who I am. They should know the members of their community. They should be saying, hello. They should be identifying [00:18:30] with those neighborhoods so that when there is a problem and they're called in, they're not seen as an invading force, but they're seen as someone who knows the community, knows the people, recognizes that there's a problem, and they will treat even someone they must apprehend for an alleged crime with respect, and appropriate legal [inaudible 00:18:49].

Carrie Hanson.: Absolutely. I think it's so important to look at the relationship of the police as really part of the community. And I think the subject of police funding allocation is going to be [00:19:00] a crucial conversation in budget preparation going forward. So this is clearly an important moment in history and hopefully the start of meaningful lasting change. So thinking to the future, what can the next generation of local government leaders learn from this moment in time?

Valerie Lemmie.: I think they can learn in a couple of ways. One, what are some of the structural changes that really should be made? A lot of the limitations that managers and police chiefs and elected officials [00:19:30] talk about are the structural

problems that make it so difficult to change. And the one I found really difficult was eliminating binding arbitration. The Cincinnati police division did have a problem in its ability or inability, I probably should say to get rid of the bad apples on the force. Through contract negotiations, the department instituted binding arbitration for disciplining officers. [00:20:00] And that meant that a state-appointed arbitrator came in and this arbitrator was approved by the union and by the state and he or she made a decision on personnel matters that were outside of the control of the manager, of the mayor, and the city council.

As an example, I fired officer Roach for what we discovered as his behavior after an internal investigation only [00:20:30] to have him rehired through binding arbitration. You can imagine the outcry in the city with that action [inaudible 00:20:38] and the arbitrator didn't live there, didn't have to live with the consequences and I felt didn't do justice to the decision that the city had made in letting officer Roach go, terminating his employment for cause. And so that's a structural problem that needs to be addressed through ordinance and potentially state law, depending [00:21:00] on where one might be located. And there are other kinds of structural issues that need to be addressed. Another one is civilian review board, an independent review of police action based on citizen complaints. I created a civilian review board in Cincinnati. I decided with the support of the mayor and council that the independence would be that they were not in the police department.

They did not report to the police department or the police chief, but in fact, they reported to me [00:21:30] and I in turn would share their report and the action I deemed appropriate with the mayor and members of city council. But having someone outside of the police department to respond to complaints was really important. One of the relationships that developed out of the Cincinnati can initiative and our legal complaints and concerns was the creation of something called the neighborhood [inaudible 00:21:57] center. Oftentimes, citizens [00:22:00] are unfamiliar with police practices. They don't know how to read the crime data, even if it's provided by the police at a meeting. And so having a place where students can go in and interact with an independent body that can talk to them about, well, what happened and was this appropriate or inappropriate, this crime means this, that means that so that they understand policing and they have a place to go to that they don't have to fear [00:22:30] any concerns about being arrested or what have you, but they can, again, that can work in collaboration with the citizen review board, but it really provides the information.

And we all know that information is power. And when citizens have accurate information about the role and responsibility of police, it just makes for them a better opportunity to give citizens and to have a better understanding of police practices and procedures. And certainly as I've said, whatever we can [00:23:00] do to improve the relationship, but the use of force, we're hearing a lot now about when and what is appropriate and what is not. My husband, was at the time [inaudible 00:23:10] the chief and public safety director and had his career,

a career in the police department of 37 years. And he mentioned to me once in passing that, unless there is something that's life threatening and clearly you have to respond, but many minor incidents like Timothy Thomas one, it was really [00:23:30] traffic violations tickets for parking violation that those are crimes that you don't have to chase someone in a dark alley, if they are likely to go home or to their mother's house.

So that you can find them tomorrow and when does a situation call for the best handling to be waiting for tomorrow when there's a better environment to make a public arrest for a misdemeanor. And so the use of [00:24:00] force and the judgment around when force is allowed and whether or not certain factors such as a chokehold are going to be allowed and if they're not, then what are the sanctions that are to be applied when officers do that. Cameras, if officers are to have cameras, then they must wear them and they should not be in a mysteriously turned off camera and excuses for that are unacceptable, and there should be some penalty for those kinds of things [00:24:30] happening. So I think those are some potential ways of thinking about the structural problem and again, I have found that police officers are as good as community residents in telling you where some of the structural problems lie and making sure to talk to both the police officers, the union and community activists and residents is really important.

I spent, as you might imagine, during my tenure in Cincinnati, [00:25:00] the lion's share of my time was spent on police issues and none of this work happens in a vacuum, not only did we have the, now when I was in Cincinnati, the responsibility to respond to the results of the riot, the Cincinnati CAN was created, but we also had a lawsuit that was filed against us for allegations by the police of racial profiling. An economic boycott was called by the NAACP and other organizations against the city and all [00:25:30] of the day-to-day problems that every urban community has that they try to address was still there and evidenced as well.

And so trying to work through those and trying to prioritize how to get all the things done and recognizing that you have to do what is the most important, the most demanding and at that point in time for me, it was improving police community relationships and addressing the concerns around safety, equity and justice and economic inclusion and creating [00:26:00] an organization that was responding to those demands that were being made not only by the community, but by the elected officials as well.

And the police wanted to be good partners, they want, they live in that city as well, they want to be good partners, and sometimes we have to help them figure out the best way to do that and that's why they have a city manager, that's why they have elected officials and that's why there's community accountability and a responsibility to be accountable to residents of the city. So I think that may [00:26:30] be a nice summary for people and there's one other thing I wanted to share, the ICMA and the Kettering Foundation had a joint



leadership development training program that you might use in your language. At the foundation, we call it a learning exchange where we're learning about ways city managers engage with the problem to solve a shared problem, and Seth Sumner, the city manager in Athens, Tennessee recently spoke to a group [00:27:00] about civic engagement.

And he said something I thought was just so critically important for managers. And that was a city manager creates an environment where good conversations can happen. And I think that's still important for city managers to think about today, what can they do to help these good, positive, healthy conversations take place that can then lead to the work that's necessary to be done to solve the difficult, wicked, [00:27:30] really systemic kinds of concerns that people have as well as the everyday concerns when people are talking, they're working together, they're communicating, there's a level of trust being built and citizens are at the center of the work to be done. I think democracy is well served and as a city manager, I always thought my job was to add value and promote democracy.

Carrie Hanson.: Wow, absolutely. This has been so great, Valerie, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

Valerie Lemmie.: [00:28:00] It has been my pleasure and I have always been someone who loved the Chinese saying and maybe with an interest in time, it's because of the duality of what it meant and these are certainly very interesting times for us. And the challenge is for all good managers to stand up and meet the task straight on and I know they can, and I know they will. And I am quite [00:28:30] frankly very proud to say that not only am I an ICMA member, but I just so appreciate the hard work that the city managers do for our communities every single day.

Carrie Hanson.: That's great to hear. Well, we greatly appreciate you speaking with us and thank you for listening to our first audiocast in our new series, Racial and Social Injustice, Continuing the Conversation.