

Partnering with Law Enforcement to Advocate for Very Young Children

An interview with John D. Wintersteen, Chief of Police, Paradise Valley, Arizona

Can you tell us a little bit about your background and what inspired you to become involved both in law enforcement and in child advocacy?

I considered a lot of things I could do with my life, but the thing that motivates me and gives me the most satisfaction is the ability to help people. Through law enforcement, I found that I have significant opportunities to help people as individuals, but also make things a little better on a larger scale. So what motivated me to get involved in law enforcement also inspired me to become a child advocate. I believe that kids are the future of our country. As a police officer and as a person, I believe that all of us have the obligation to look after those who are least able to protect themselves, which includes children.

In what ways are you currently involved in public policy on behalf of infants and toddlers?

I try to encourage people – police officers, police chiefs, and police managers – to become working members of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. I lobby at the state legislature for things that I believe are beneficial to kids. And, on a day to day basis, I give priority to those individual cases and system problems that involve children. I have been involved in a number of ballot initiatives. Also, I contact my congressman and my two senators in Washington to talk with them and their staff about issues of importance to young children and their families.

What do you think are the most critical issues impacting very young children, and on what issues do you advocate?

There are two issues that I believe are crucial for all kids, but are particularly important for younger children. The first issue is obtaining good, quality health care, not just adequate care. The second issue is ensuring access to good parenting resources through non-profit agencies and government programs and services. Resources, counseling, training, parent education, intervention – these are all things that will help a child develop and should be readily available to everyone. I also support high quality child care. While child care does not necessarily have to be provided by a government agency, it certainly needs to be monitored and government is the logical entity to do that. Underlying all of these issues is money, so I advocate for spending money on programs that support families with young children.

What unique role can law enforcement officials play in influencing the public policy process on behalf of very young children?

As a police chief, when I testify on contentious law enforcement issues in uniform, I have been treated rudely and questioned aggressively. But, when I go down to the state legislature in uniform to testify on matters pertaining to children, it is completely different. When it comes to children's issues, elected officials are very interested in my point of view as a police officer and especially as a police chief.

At a statewide police chief meeting where I made a presentation for Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, the Town Marshal of Tombstone, AZ, asked me why he should spend his time trying to get the legislature to spend more money on kids, when our state was faced with a crisis in prison beds, for example. My response was that we must devote some of our resources, and a lot of our focus, to solving problems before they occur. It is not just about solving the problems of the day, such as prisons, by spending money on the consequences of crime. As law enforcement officers, we need to let our elected officials know that we support prevention, and that means dedicating money and energy to young children.

What advice would you give others in the law enforcement community who want to get involved in advocacy on behalf of infants, toddlers and their families?

First, get the facts. The best way to get the facts is through organizations such as Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, ZERO TO THREE, and local advocacy organizations. Second, get involved with these organizations because you will find support, you will find like-minded individuals, and you will have the ability to use teamwork in approaching public policy issues related to kids.

How can infant-toddler professionals form partnerships with law enforcement officials to help make a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers?

The best thing to do is go to your local police chief or sheriff and talk to him or her. That is where policy is made on an operational level, and in most states the chief's association and the sheriff's association have their own lobbyists. These organizations can pass resolutions of support on critical issues. Those resolutions may make a difference when they are put in the hands of elected officials who are making budget decisions, making program decisions, or deciding which laws to pass.

When you speak with your local sheriff or chief, find out what the problems are in your community and what local law enforcement is doing to address the issues. From there, you can figure out where child development professionals can help make a difference. The best way to begin a positive collaboration is to find someone who is like-minded in law enforcement and then getting that person to network with other law enforcement professionals.

Any last thoughts for the Policy Network?

Working life and family life can be very busy, and for police chiefs, infant toddler professionals, attorneys, doctors, and all early childhood advocates – there are always too many things to do. But, I challenge anyone that looks around at our communities, our country, and our world, to say that other things are more important than the children who will become the next generation of leaders. I believe that the best thing we can do as a legacy for the future is to care for the children and give them the best start in life.

***John D. Wintersteen** has been the Chief of Police in Paradise Valley, Arizona since 1995. Paradise Valley is a community which has long had a special interest in preventing and controlling problems involving youth. Chief Wintersteen is a lifelong volunteer in youth programs. He is an active volunteer in the Boy Scouts of America, presently serving as a member of the Executive Board of the Grand Canyon Council, an active volunteer in the Learning for Life and Law Enforcement Explorers, statewide member of the National Service Team for Law Enforcement Exploring, and chair of his district nominating committee. He has also been involved in The Red Cross, Girl Scouts and Special Olympic youth programs. Chief Wintersteen is a registered public lobbyist, and testifies on matters pertaining to children, drug and alcohol services, and traffic safety at the state legislature. In 1994, Chief Wintersteen retired from the United States Marine Corps, culminating a 29-year career, after serving for four years as the head of law enforcement and security at the Marine headquarters in Washington, DC. He and his wife Elaine have three grown children, ages 28, 34 and 35, and two granddaughters.*

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