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# ***Proactive Alliance:*** **Combining Policing and Counseling Psychology to Build Relationships and Community Engagement**

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*The Proactive Alliance policing approach integrates policing methods with adapted concepts from counseling psychology created by a licensed professional counselor and a police officer. This collaborative approach is a prevention model based on building relationships with the community in a variety of settings and using the humanity of the individual police officer as his or her most valuable instrument.*

The Proactive Alliance relationship-based approach integrates policing methods with adapted concepts from counseling psychology created by a licensed professional counselor and a police officer. This collaborative approach is a prevention model based on building relationships with the community in a variety of settings and using the humanity of the individual police officer as his or her most valuable instrument.

Although forging collaborative relationships has been suggested and encouraged by most police departments, exactly how to develop and improve existing skills to achieve this goal has been uncertain. The ability to create lasting, purposeful relationships with stakeholders is not an innate skill but can be taught. While some police officers have a natural talent for social interaction, all personality types are capable of learning how to build productive relationships with the appropriate training. Building a productive relationship requires effective communication and empathy but must also incorporate collaboration. Proactive Alliance recognizes the value of the transactional de-escalation techniques that police use

to defuse adversarial conflict and empowers officers to actively engage with the public before a conflict occurs. When a crisis does occur, the relationship acts as a problem-solving medium, giving the officer more options than enforcement alone, including the ability to draw from the community for the most effective solutions. Relationship-based policing is defined as “Establishing and maintaining individual relationships with community members and collateral professionals with the purposeful goal of collaborative problem-solving and management of complex community issues.”<sup>1</sup>

Engaging reticent or distrustful stakeholders is an ongoing challenge. Certainly, there are no simple solutions when trying to change community fear and cynicism of police. Evolving from a culture of enforcement-first policing to a relationship-based approach requires a systemic shift. Encouraging officers to initiate consistent dialogue with community members and organizations enables police to listen to and understand specific worries, fears, and complaints and arrive at a mutually beneficial outcome: community members feel validated and more secure, and police have a better understanding of what problems could develop. Once a level of order and security exists, discussing and engaging in mutually beneficial goals can begin.

The concept of Proactive Alliance, developed by Molly Mastoras, MA, LPC, is a method of collaboration among police, businesses, and community members fostered by active listening techniques, effective communication, and empathy to develop purposeful and productive relationships. This approach draws from and adapts counseling psychology concepts, including Family Systems Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Person-Centered techniques, the Stages of Change, Trauma-informed techniques, and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Empathy is the foundation of a successful therapeutic relationship, the key element to establishing trust and safety in the context of counseling, and is the basis of all successful therapeutic techniques, most notably Person-Centered therapy created by the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers. Unconditional positive regard, a term coined by Rogers, is the concept of accepting and supporting someone without judgment of their behavior.

When adapted to a relationship-based policing approach, unconditional positive regard can be an essential tool when interacting with community members in a way that is non-judgmental, supportive, and accepting rather than punitive. Although this approach is not appropriate when a situation is violent or threatening to police or the community, it can be a helpful perspective when establishing relationships with the public and building trust. Other therapeutic techniques based on the Rogerian approach, including adapted concepts from Motivational Interviewing, also assist police in working with the community to generate change. Ideas that originate in Family Systems Therapy, such as employing appropriate interpersonal boundaries, are another element that helps police use themselves as an effective instrument of change while protecting their emotional well-being. The fundamental purpose of Proactive Alliance is the development of **responsive**

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<sup>1</sup> Mastoras, M.C., (2022). Proactive Alliance: Combining Policing and Counseling Psychology. Arizona State University Center for Problem-Oriented Policing  
[https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/proactive\\_alliance\\_mastoras.pdf](https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/proactive_alliance_mastoras.pdf)

**collaboration**, which is the act of standing beside a community member or stakeholder in cooperation so that when a conflict or crisis occurs, the relationship provides an environment of increased options and problem-solving.

The goal of Proactive Alliance is to teach specific, immediately applicable techniques to improve police officers' ability to establish both short-term rapport and long-term working relationships with community members. With effective collaboration, police and community stakeholders can develop a safer community by maintaining order, using fewer resources with more effective outcomes, and establishing transparency with multiple government agencies, leading to efficiency. Proactive Alliance employs a diverse array of psychological theory and counseling techniques adapted to align with concepts of collaborative order maintenance and procedural justice in the law enforcement environment. The training involves two key stages: (1) strengthening officers' awareness of themselves as agents of change and (2) teaching them to use this new mindset as a tool to build relationships and establish collaborations.

### **Stage 1: Officers as Agents of Change**

Proactive Alliance is based on the notion that an individual officer's authenticity, personality, and personal judgment are assets. The initial portion of the training provides a forum to process and discuss this concept through exercises aimed at self-exploration and self-awareness. We view the officer's self/personality as a "tool of the trade" that they need to take care of and protect, as they would their duty weapon. Three elements are crucial to the maintenance of "self" in this context: interpersonal boundaries, locus of control, and an understanding of the power differential between the police and the community.

The concept of **interpersonal boundaries** originates from Family Systems Theory, which teaches the importance of self-differentiation, or the ability to have convictions, principles, and reactions independent of a group.<sup>2</sup> The ability to identify and respond effectively when a personal boundary has been crossed by a community member or colleague is crucial to maintaining a solid sense of self. Just as therapists are taught how to protect themselves from emotional exposure in the workplace and not become personally involved while still maintaining the ability to effectively guide and collaborate with clients, Proactive Alliance teaches officers to use their authentic self to connect with others but also protect their emotional well being from harm or interference.

**Locus of control** is a related concept that refers to people's ability to control themselves and influence the world around them<sup>3</sup> rather than merely reacting to crises and feeling controlled by outside forces. Proactive Alliance teaches officers to reorient their perspective to engage in purposeful prevention by proactively initiating collaboration and preparing for rather than reacting to crises. An officer who uses him or herself as an agent of change and aims to collaborate with stakeholders is a **proactive ally**.

The ability to understand and acknowledge the **power differential** between police and the

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<sup>2</sup> M. Bowen, 'Theory in the practice of psychotherapy', in P. J. Guerin (ed.), *Family therapy*, (New York, NY: Gardner, 1976), pp. 42–90; M. Bowen, *Family therapy in clinical practice*, (Aronson, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Rotter, *Social learning and clinical psychology*, (Prentice-Hall, 1954).

community is another important component of self-awareness and effective community engagement. This is particularly important in communities or with individuals who have had traumatic interactions with police: a sense of interpersonal safety must be established before any collaboration or working relationship can develop.<sup>4</sup> If a stakeholder feels they are not in control (of their choices, feedback, etc.), they will feel threatened and unable to collaborate effectively.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, despite their position of power, officers must also feel safe before further accomplishments and realizing their full potential are possible.<sup>6</sup>

### **Stage 2: Relationship Building and Collaboration Skills Training**

After establishing the importance of self as part of their toolkit, Proactive Alliance teaches officers **relationship-building** and **responsive collaboration** skills grounded in the Rogerian person-centered approach to counseling psychology.<sup>7</sup> Proactive Alliance is grounded in the principle of **productive empathy**, an adaptation of the Rogerian concept of unconditional positive regard to the relationship-based policing context. Unconditional positive regard is the concept of accepting and supporting someone without judgment of their behavior, which is essential when interacting with community members in a supportive, non-punitive way.

Productive empathy involves active listening and dynamic communication techniques to establish rapport, personal connections, and, ultimately, long-term working relationships. Proactive Alliance adapts concepts from Motivational Interviewing (MI), an evidence-based approach<sup>8</sup> based on Rogerian person-centered therapy and the Stages of Change model, to help officers elicit change in a non-judgmental way.<sup>9</sup> MI techniques—which have been used with success in the mental health, substance abuse, and medical fields, among others—use a person’s expressed thoughts about change to evoke actual change by listening, normalizing ambivalence, and collaborating to achieve change rather than direct it.<sup>10</sup> Proactive Alliance also teaches officers how to “reframe” a problem as an opportunity or to notice successes before offering constructive feedback. “Reframing” was developed out of the concept of “cognitive restructuring” or “cognitive reframing,” used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)<sup>11</sup> to challenge cognitive distortions and change thinking to a more positive orientation.

The goal of teaching these relationship-building techniques is to allow officers to work toward **responsive collaboration**, or the act of working side by side in cooperation. Proactive Alliance empowers police to initiate relationships to establish and maintain collaborative changes, saving enforcement only for when absolutely necessary. Rather than the police and the community being positioned as adversaries, all stakeholders are involved

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<sup>4</sup> J. Herman, *Trauma and recovery*, (Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Herman, *Trauma and recovery*.

<sup>6</sup> A. H. Maslow, ‘A theory of human motivation’, *Psychological Review*, 50/4 (1943), 370–96.

<sup>7</sup> C. Rogers, *On becoming a person*, (Houghton-Mifflin, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> W. R. Miller, *Systematic and meta-analyses of research on motivational interviewing*, (2017).

<sup>9</sup> J. O. Prochaska and C. C. DiClemente, ‘Stages and processes of self-change of smoking: Toward an integrative model of change’, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 51/3 (1983), 390–95.

<sup>10</sup> W. R. Miller and S. Rollnick, *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*, (The Guilford Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> A. T. Beck, *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*, (Meridian, 1976).

and accountable. This unified approach is crucial to the success of large-scale community problem-solving, which includes diverse municipal and community stakeholders such as police, fire, zoning, public health, human services, economic development, business owners, civic associations, faith-based groups, and violence interrupters. Proactive Alliance supports a proactive, collaborative approach among these stakeholders akin to the concept of **wraparound services** in child welfare and special education, in which different services are combined to fill gaps and help families remain intact. Police can maintain this collaboration by supporting stakeholders to change and control their own behavior without trying to assert control over them. The latter approach, typical of aggressive law enforcement approaches, can trigger the natural human reaction to resist when someone, especially an authority figure, tries to control or direct behavior, whereas collaboration increases efficiency and safety for both the police and the community.

In policing, as in counseling psychology, it is important to meet stakeholders where they are and not where they “should” or “could” be. This **collaborative perspective** levels the playing field and sets the stage for realistic expectations. Proactive Alliance teaches officers to adjust their perspectives and expectations as stakeholders learn and change in response to guidance and support. Officers learn to give **collaborative feedback**, which focuses on strengths: what is the stakeholder doing right already, and how can we build on that together? If officers notice and call out these successes, stakeholders feel empowered rather than defeated when receiving feedback.

Law enforcement has an opportunity to critically evaluate their practices and perspectives and to accept guidance from fields outside of policing. Officers and deputies cannot be asked to change their behaviors without specific directives and a systematic approach that can be taught and reproduced. There are clear differences between the unstructured philosophy of community policing and the evidence behind the systematic method of relationship-based policing. Evidence-based concepts in fields such as counseling psychology are applicable when adapted to law enforcement work. Proactive Alliance can help policing better meet the needs and expectations of the communities they serve. Trust, legitimacy, and dignity are reasonable expectations for both law enforcement and the community through the development of individual relationships.

## About the Authors

**Molly C. Mastoras** is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in Virginia and Connecticut and co-founder and president of Safe Night LLC. She has worked as an assistant program director and probation counselor for the Fairfax County Juvenile & Domestic Relations District Court and as a social worker for the Fairfax County Office for Women and Arlington County Child Protective Services (CPS). Molly has worked extensively with survivors of sexual assault throughout her career, leading to the creation of Safe Night Active Bystander, a sexual assault prevention and intervention training program. She developed the Proactive Alliance relationship-based approach, which teaches police and enforcement agencies to develop relationships to enhance problem-solving with the community using adapted counseling therapy concepts. She co-authored several articles, including *Proactive Alliance* in IACP Police Chief Magazine, *Productive and Proactive* in Sheriff & Deputy Magazine, and *Proactive Alliance: Combining Policing and Counseling Psychology* in the Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being with Dr. Charlotte Gill. Molly has presented the Proactive Alliance concept at the American Society of Evidenced-Based Policing (ASEBP) conference, the Problem-Oriented Policing (POP) Conference, and the International Conference on Law Enforcement & Public Health (LEPH). Molly also serves on the Board of Directors for the Washington Regional Alcohol Program (WRAP).

**Dimitrios (Jim) Mastoras** is co-founder and executive vice president of Safe Night LLC. Jim served as a Master Police Officer in Arlington County, Virginia, for almost twenty-four years and was named Arlington's first nightlife liaison. Jim's nightlife management model was recognized as a national model to reduce alcohol-related violence and harm by the U.S. DOJ COPS Office in a toolkit he authored, *The Arlington Restaurant Initiative - A Nightlife Strategy to Improve Safety and Economic Viability*. Jim is a senior Proactive Alliance relationship-based policing instructor teaching police and collateral city agencies how to establish trustful relationships with community stakeholders to shift to collaborative problem-solving. The Proactive Alliance relationship-based approach has been used to address many complex community issues across the U.S., including alcohol-related violence, homelessness, and traffic safety and engagement. He is also a nightlife safety and community engagement expert who regularly speaks at national conferences. Jim has authored or contributed to numerous articles and case studies for the National Policing Institute, Policing Insight, IACP Police Chief Magazine, NSA Sheriff & Deputy Magazine, and Observatory of Public Sector Innovation.

## About Safe Night LLC

Founded in 2018, Safe Night LLC is a consulting firm that provides solutions to increase trust, safety, and economic viability. Safe Night works with police departments, local and state enforcement agencies, economic development, business improvement districts, private businesses, community groups, and public/private partnerships to improve the safety and vibrancy of their community. We have years of experience in law enforcement, public policy, and social services, which can greatly influence your community for the better.