

Plane crash investigations offer lessons on how to avoid deaths in police encounters

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(Photo: Beбето Matthews, Associated Press)

The emergency landing of a U.S. Airways flight in the Hudson River in 2009 inspired a film starring Tom Hanks and was deemed the "Miracle on the Hudson" because no one aboard died.

Passengers and pilots alike cheered the outcome. But officials at the National Transportation Safety Board also reviewed what went wrong, knowing it was only a matter of time before birds would get sucked into the engines of another plane and disable it. There was no guarantee of another happy ending.

That's the approach the NTSB takes every time a plane crashes. This week, officials from that agency as well as medical and aerospace experts came together with local and national law enforcement professionals to discuss whether a similar process could reduce the number of people who die in encounters between police and the public. (</story/news/local/2017/01/26/can-police-shootings-can-evaluated-like-plane-crashes/97080414/>)

The conference, sponsored by The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread and the University of Wisconsin Law School, was the first step in designing a statewide system for law enforcement to learn from past incidents. It would be modeled on those of other professions that carry life-and-death risk.

The NTSB reviews not only incidents that end in injury or death but also those that result in extensive damage to aircraft with the ambitious goal of eliminating adverse events, said Acting Managing Director Sharon W. Bryson, who shared the agency's process with the 30 attendees at the conference.



Sharon W. Bryson, acting managing director of the NTSB (Photo: Gina Barton)

"We would all like to be able to get to zero ... and law enforcement would also like to get to that point where no law enforcement members or members of the community are injured or killed," said Bryson, whose husband is a police officer.

The idea for the conference was sparked, in part, by an article co-authored by Michael Bell, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel whose namesake son was fatally shot by Kenosha police in 2004 (<http://archive.jsonline.com/news/crime/182366891.html>).

The officers who killed Bell were quickly cleared of wrongdoing after an internal investigation by officers within their own department.



Bell was the driving force behind a first-of-its-kind Wisconsin law (<http://archive.jsonline.com/watchdog/watchdogreports/gov-scott-walker-expected-to-sign-police-custody-bill-b99253819z1-256342301.html>) that requires outside entities to lead investigations into officer-involved deaths here.

A system for examining and sharing the factors that contributed to an incident with an eye toward prevention is the next step, said Cecelia Klingele, associate professor at the UW law school.

"A key feature of a good review system ... is the recognition that we have to be focused on helping people prevent future incidents rather than blaming people for past mistakes," she said.

It would not replace methods already in place to hold officers accountable for misconduct, she said.

The focus on using past incidents as teaching tools has gained traction in recent years in light of a number of high-profile police-involved deaths, including Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and Eric Garner in New York.

Lt. Timothy Leitzke, who works in internal affairs at the Milwaukee Police Department, said such a review system could go a long way toward restoring the public's trust in law enforcement, which has eroded over the past year or so.

"We have to be part of the process that says, 'Hey, we're always putting our best foot forward,' " he said. "We cannot perform our duties without the confidence of the people that we are sworn to serve."

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