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Thomson Police Chief returns from executive training in Israel

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Thomson Police Chief Courtney Gale has just returned from 15 days of intensive public safety leadership training with the top police executives of Israel.

The program

Gale was part of a 20-member delegation that partnered with the Israel Police for the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange's (GILEE) 30th annual peer-to-peer executive training program. While in Israel, they were shown best practices and the latest technologies in policing and public safety. They learned more about strategies to successfully lead law enforcement programs and use community policing to build safer neighborhoods for minority communities in partnership with all community stakeholders.

The delegation included 12 Georgia police chiefs and command staff — including the Atlanta and Gwinnett public school system chiefs — three Georgia sheriffs, the director of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), a law enforcement coordinator for the Department of Justice, the director of the Georgia Public Safety Training Center, a deputy commissioner from the Georgia Department of Public Safety and a senior law enforcement official from Tennessee.

Director Michael Register of the GBI served as Head of Delegation. GILEE

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Photo courtesy of TPD Chief Courtney Gale
TPD Chief Courtney Gale had the opportunity to meet with a variety of law enforcement officials throughout Israel during the training trip.



Thomson Police Chief Courtney Gale learned about national police operations in Haifa while visiting a range of Israel's law enforcement units.

Founding Director Robbie Friedmann and Associate Director Col. (Ret.) Brent Cummings led the delegation while Assistant Director Nadia Borissova managed its operations.

During their orientation, the delegates heard from several former GILEE delegates including Chattanooga Police Chief Celeste Murphy and John King, Georgia's Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner, whose interest focused on the use of volunteers in support of law enforcement operations during his time in Israel. He gave the keynote address prior to their departure.

"This will be the most impactful professional experience in your law enforcement career," King said. "This experience has forged relationships that will last a lifetime. You're going to be exposed to something truly extraordinary. It's important that you think now about what you're going to bring back, how you're going to share your knowledge. You have a responsibility to give back."

"GILEE gives U.S. law enforcement leaders an opportunity to expand their professional perspective by visiting their peers," Cummings said. They are able to witness firsthand how their peers perform differently but also share many similarities. This broadening experience through peer-to-peer exchange makes these executives better leaders, which helps our communities receive better services."

Nearly 1,250 law enforcement executives from the U.S. and countries around the world have graduated from GILEE peer-to-peer exchange programs during its 32 years. Additionally, almost 43,000 public safety, homeland security and police executives have attended GILEE-led special briefings, seminars, workshops, training sessions and conferences featuring experts on issues related to homeland security, public safety, community policing and law enforcement.

GILEE is a research center within Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies. It enhances public safety by nurturing partnerships within and across public law enforcement agencies and the private sector. Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, GILEE's focus on the protection of civil and human rights and its development of executive leadership exemplifies the core mission of the school.

“‘The role of policing’ — to quote John Alderson, who many consider the father of community policing in Britain in the 1970s and 80s — ‘is to guarantee the freedom of movement of people and merchandise. Current policing policies and practices are challenged by many communities and by decision makers,’” Friedmann said. “Bringing police closer to the community and the community closer to the police is the essence of community policing. We aim at sharing best practices to achieve closer proximity with the community to provide better police service.”



The Georgia delegation poses for a formal group photograph.

The experience

Gale was able to participate in the program thanks to a sponsorship from the leadership of the GILEE based on her application for the program. The city of Thomson's only expense was to pay her regular salary during the trip. "It was a very valuable experience and I appreciate that they saw the benefit in including a smaller agency that normally wouldn't have this opportunity," Gale said. "I told them I will do my part to share the story and will commit even more to build those relationships with our community."

During the time in Israel, Gale said the delegation often didn't stay in one place very long — particularly outdoors — given that an international delegation could be a potential target for attack. Visits to a variety of law enforcement substations allowed participants to learn about the varied situations and approaches used dependent upon locations or circumstances. For instance, Gale said, substations near a national border respond to different situations than a substation covering an area where large public events are held. Those abutting a neighbor country also have to coordinate with Israel's border patrol.

Gale said one beneficial tour was of an incident command center, where she learned about how law enforcement handles response and communications among multiple agencies.



Gale said she noticed that many of the public signs include multiple languages to ensure understanding. One key topic among the law enforcement groups was fostering relationships among diverse populations.

"We were able to go into their incident command center where they have nothing but communication resources, computers, telephones, radios. They use that with larger events. You have the ability to communicate immediately through the different mediums with different radios for the different work groups," Gale explained. "They would show examples of that and how it would work. We were able to watch on real-time cameras when officers were pulling a vehicle over. You could hear it and we had a translator with us, so we could hear the radio. They do not waste any time in Israel, whether it's a traffic stop or eating a meal, you don't sit in one spot for very long in public arenas."



Members of the Sderot police unit talked about the policing challenges in their region of Israel.

One similar challenge Gale said both the Thomson Police and Israel's force face is the challenge of dealing with organized crime, particularly in relation to gangs and drugs.

Another that appears to be universal is the difficulty hiring and retaining officers. Though Israel requires young people to serve in either the military or the national police for a period of time, the younger population there is shrinking, and it has become more challenging to get those who do serve to stay beyond their required tenure.

Israeli police, like Thomson's, are focused on community policing, believing in Alderson's theory of successful policing. In Israel, however, there is the additional need to mirror the Israeli and Arab communities by seeking out Israelis of Arab descent to serve and foster relationships within that community.

"They need to, especially given the degree of historic tension. If you're an Arab and you witness a crime, or you're the victim of a crime, are you going to necessarily trust an Israeli police officer?" Gale said. "So there is an Israeli police officer who is Arab, or of Arab descent, who can have that relationship and, I would assume, a better explanation or relation to the way things are happening or why it's happening. That's the big thing.... Here's why we do what we do."

Gale said she saw situations in which Israeli and Arab individuals found common ground to work together for the betterment of the community. That could also apply to a local police force serving a diverse community stateside.

"The commanders of the police were saying, 'We have Muslims that work here, and we have Jews that work here,' so somehow, they have been able to bridge that and their focus is on the mission of the organization," said the chief. "I think that's the same steps I would make. You just have to ensure that they will remain focused on the mission and not go in a negative direction. It's beneficial to have that gobetween to develop that relationship."

Gale said the delegation, headed by Israeli police leadership, was hosted for dinner by an Arab sheik and his family, demonstrating the efforts many are making to bridge the divide.

"I think it speaks volumes when someone will invite you into their home. It wasn't pretentious. You could tell when the two men greeted one another that they were laughing. They had that history to make it comfortable," she said. "The fact that they showed the hospitality, I think, is breaking those barriers down one piece at a time."

Gale said that although it isn't generally tied to religion in the United States, tensions between various populations.



The delegation was welcomed at Israel's Parliament.

"In law enforcement, we are coming face to face with it. We need to own the past and change the wrongs that have happened, so they do not repeat themselves. I'm committed with the training that I'm providing the officers that here are wrongs that occurred in the past. We're aware of it; we see it; we learn from it," she said. "How do we change our procedures? How can we understand some of the fear in parts of our community? When you know the history, you have

better patience, and you will take that extra couple minutes to explain the why. You just you have to commit to it and cannot think you've mastered it. You have to continuously reinforce the foundation." The focus on having the force reflect the community they serve and helping citizens understand the how and why of the actions officers take is important, the chief said.



One stop during the 15-day executive training program was Israel's border police academy.

Gale, herself, said she wants and needs to get out into the community more to develop wider and stronger relationships, as well.

"I've said this before. I would love to get out in the community more. I'm committed to it. I haven't done it as much as I had hoped, but it is the foundation of what we need to be doing," she said. "If people want me to come out to them, I'm more than happy to. I want them to know our officers. You don't have to be a formal organization."

Gale said she will also use those opportunities to recruit members of the community to serve in the department.

"I want to bring solutions to the table, but I also want to educate our citizens into understanding what it means when you hear we're short with personnel. I've got officers that are working 18-hour shifts and that's brutal after a couple of weeks. I want to appeal to any local persons that would be interested in working here," she said. "It goes back to everything we were talking about in Israel. It is just as important here. We actually have two officers from Thomson, and they have those relationships. I would love to have more."



The delegation listens to a presentation at the Israeli Parliament.



Participants learned about how Israel's traffic force operates, including how changes in enforcement reduced traffic deaths in the country.

The chief said she gained a wide range of contacts both within Georgia's law enforcement community and Israel's national police that she can now call upon for insight, advice, or support going forward.

"Suppose we had a large event here. I could say, 'Okay, what do you all do? How do you plan for these types of events?' and they'd be more than happy to help," she said. "I'm confident if I needed some resources, fellow officers from the state of Georgia would respond. That was another benefit of this immersion. It has expanded the resources that are potentially available to the police department."

Asked if she learned anything specific that would cause her to change anything about the way the Thomson Police Department operates, Gale said her take-away was more of a reinforcement.

"I don't. I don't think I'm going to change anything," she said. "It's reinforcing the importance of our mission and our focus on our community."



Law enforcement participants from the Georgia learned that there are many common challenges among departments, regardless of the country where they operate.