DAVID ONEK: Welcome to the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast, a coproduction of the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice and the Berkeley School of Journalism. I’m your host, David Onek. The podcast, recorded weekly in the Berkeley School of Journalism studios, features in depth interviews with a wide range of criminal justice leaders: law enforcement officials, policy makers, advocates, service providers, academics, and others. The podcast gets behind the sound bites that far too often dominate the public dialogue about criminal justice to have detailed, nuanced conversations about criminal justice policy.

Today’s guest is Oakland Police Chief Anthony Batts. Batts was appointed as Oakland’s chief last October. He previously worked for the Long Beach Police Department for 27 years, serving as chief from 2002-2009. During Batts’ tenure as chief, Long Beach’s crime rate dropped to its lowest level since 1975. Batts grew up in South Central Los Angeles. He holds a doctorate in
Public Administration, a Master’s degree in business management and a bachelor of science in law enforcement administration. Batts has received numerous awards and commendations in his career including the leadership Long Beach Alumni of the year and the California State University Alumni of the year. He joins us in studio this morning, Anthony Batts, welcome to the program.

ANTHONY BATTS: Thank you, David. It’s good to be here, but I have to say that I’m upset that you had me on after Bill Bratton, who’s a good friend, Gil Kerlikowske who is a good friend, and George Gascon.

ONEK: Well, you’re in good company and we really appreciate you coming in. Now, when you were initially approached about applying to be Oakland’s chief, you declined, why did you initially decline and what changed your mind?

BATTS: Much like many jobs that come open for chiefs of police, you have head hunters that give a call to people that they think may have the skill set to fit what they’re looking for in a particular city, which is what happened in this case. The headhunter called me, I was in a comfortable position, we as a
team in long beach had done a good job of reducing crime so it was time to take an easy slide into home on the downside of my career, I wasn’t looking for a sharp instrument to stab myself in the eye, I wasn’t looking for a challenge, but after the head hunter and I had a conversation on a Wednesday, three days later on the 21st of March you had four officers that were killed.

And just out of happenstance because we had the conversation and then that tragic incident took place it drew my attention to Oakland where I started doing much more research.

ONEK: And then as you did more research what did you find that made you want to take on the challenge of being Oakland’s chief?

BATTS: I came up for the funeral of the officers and I listened to many of the things that were said, I’ve been around law enforcement for, as a police officer for 28 years and then growing up in police departments, so 30 plus years, I could read the subtext of what was being said at the funeral. And there was a lot of pain, obviously in that police organization on a lot of different levels. And as I started reading papers, and talking to people after the funeral in the community, there’s a lot of pain in certain parts of the community too.
And I started picking up past newspapers and I saw the level of violence that was in the city, the level of carnage that took place on a yearly basis and I asked a question, isn’t anybody upset this, does anybody care about this, because if you look, go back and look at the records, the murder rate in the city of Oakland for the last 30 years is pretty consistently either a little above 100 or just slightly below, but for a city of its size, 150 murders, 140, 130, is a huge number which unfortunately has given us the tag of the fifth most dangerous city in the United States.

And with my skill set, with my love of making a difference for youth, seeing so many youth impacted in a city, I wanted to come and see if I could make a difference. I don’t know if I could change things but I wanted to see if I could assist.

ONEK: Since you’ve come on board you’ve repeatedly said that one of the biggest challenges facing the department is building trust with the community. I understand you’ve been going out into the community almost every night to meet with community members and set an example for the department. What have you heard at these meetings?
BATTS: Going out every night, and every morning. I had a meeting this morning early and had one yesterday and staying late last night and have a couple meetings tonight so what I’m trying to do is personify for my police officers exactly what I want them to do, is be open to the community, to listen, and I think a chief has to be accountable to its community and so as I go out my purpose is to give my vision of where I want to with the organization, to challenge the city, to challenge the residents of this city, to stand up and make a difference, and to make it short, people have said that they’re very proud of the city of Oakland.

Coming in from an outsider, you read different things in the newspaper but people love this city. I don’t care where you live in Oakland whether you’re in the hills or whether you’re in the east side or the west side or the central portion, they really love this city, its rich tradition, it’s diversity, you can feel it. What I’ve found is that even internally in the organization the police officers love and have a great deal of pride in carrying that patch of the Oakland Police Department.

But what I do pick up is that in certain areas we have service
issues that we don’t do a very good job to be perfectly honest, and things that I’ve seen through diagnostic approaches that I’ve seen inside the organization. I was already aware of that. And that people want to turn around the crime rate. I think whether I’m talking to citizens, newspapers, business people, I think everyone is in line, so it’s almost like a synergy, everybody is in alignment that they want to turn this city around. It’s at that time, it’s at that place, I think we’re on a precipice.

ONEK: So as chief you’ve been going out to these community meetings, but what is the department as a whole doing differently since you became chief to improve its relationship with the community?

BATTS: We’re doing a lot, and a lot of, there’s a lot of things going on. There’s so much change going on in the organization I’m a little concerned that I’m doing too much change in a short amount of time. And you’ve got to kind of balance that and make sure that the wheels don’t come out as you’re going through a lot of change. Now as I walked in the door, the organization made it clear to me, they wanted change. The employees did. Day one, when I stepped in, I did an employee survey at 8 AM in the
morning.

And in comparison, Long Beach is a much larger police department than Oakland probably by a number of 500-600 employees more. And when I did the survey at Long Beach it took me about three weeks to get 300 returns, which is statistically it’s an average number. When I came to Oakland I did it on the first day that I came in the door, I got 300 returns the first day. So that indicated to me, there was a lot of issues within the organization or that there was things that people just wanted to share. Which, in actuality it was both. And so I listened to the employees and the morale issues were clearly low, and probably I shouldn’t use the term morale because that’s seen as different things to different people.

But employees didn’t feel appreciated or valued within the organization. And within the city. So we’ve put pieces in place where we started listening to the employees, you know there’s a course that I used to teach at Cal State Long Beach on generational evolution that takes place in organizations and it’s clear that we have a very military-based mechanism within the Oakland Police Department, so we’re trying to change and flatten that. Where we listen to employees, they have a stake,
they participate, we set up committees, and we shift and we change that way.

We’re looking at some of inefficiencies within the organization and a lot of the management, basic management tools in the police department, the police department does not exist so we have to rebuild that. The issues dealing with workload. Beat configuration, beat workload, systems to tell me how productive guys are being, we don’t have any of those systems, so I’m rebuilding them, I’m bringing in automation with the products that I used from the city of Long Beach to make sure that we have those basic things.

Making sure that the leadership here manages resources properly, that I don’t have officers standing around, how we dispatch is a little inefficient, we have three large areas in our city. And within those three areas, we have officers that bounce all over the place. They can get a call from the hills, next call could be all the way down to the port, I mean calls all over the place. Which are very inefficient, gas guzzling way to deploy resources.

So we’re trying to get back to beat integrity. We’re short on
officers to do it the proper way. We probably need about 75 more officers to do beat integrity, where you have officers who are assigned to a beat for anywhere from a year to 18 months, and so people know them. They handle calls in that area, they know the resources in there. So a lot of the basic foundational things we’re reconstructing as a team within the organization.

ONEK: One thing you’ve expressed concerns about is the department’s response times in responding to calls for service from the community. The average response time for highest priority calls was 15 minutes when you took over, in comparison our response time in San Francisco where I sit on the police commission is about 4 minutes for the highest priority calls and I think nationally the standard is about 5 minutes. With the limited resources you have as you just spoke about, how are you planning to reduce the response times?

BATTS: Part of that is poor management of our resources, and we’re changing that and the organization is, putting its arms around it. Number one it starts with the dispatch center to make sure that we’re dispatching units the closest units, and that’s what I was telling you about, having this response where guys are flying from one part of the city to the next part of the
city, that’s inefficient. So we’re bringing on technology, GPS, AVL.

That should be up this summer. The way that we put out calls is going to change, we’re already in the process of doing that. We’re going to use more computers than dispatchers, in the dispatch center so we’re changing that. And also I have just instituted a new policy we just had a story done by San Francisco Chronicle, where I’ve expanded the role of priority three response, which is lights and sirens going to hot calls. And when you’re at home by yourself and someone’s coming in your window at 3 AM in the morning, 15 minutes is a long amount of time. 30 seconds is a long amount of time.

And I come from an organization that we took pride in being the fastest, having the fastest response time to priority one calls of any large agency in the state of California. So that’s where I came from.

ONEK: What was that average time?

BATTS: The city of Long Beach, it’s about 4 minutes. So we took a great deal of pride in that. That was our red badge of
courage. Oakland I want to do the same thing. When we instituted that new policy of response, the first weekend we did it, I got feedback from officers, we had five different incidents that the officers themselves came back that first day and said we wouldn’t have been here in time if we had responded the way that we usually do.

In one of those episodes we had a woman who was being beaten and kidnapped, she was drug into a van and they were trying to drive off with her, and because we had a code three response, we got there so quickly that we stopped that and the officers themselves said normally we wouldn’t have been here that fast. And that could’ve been a life. So that’s working for us and we’re changing the basic mentality of how we give service.

ONEK: You’ve talked about the importance of engaging the community but for every officer you have walking the beat and getting to know community members that’s one less officer in a patrol car responding to calls to get the response time down. How are you dealing with that tension?

BATT'S: Oakland is a very unique place. We have 63 officers that are called PSOs, Public Service Officers. And pretty much they
work in the community and that 63 are dedicated along those lines. And on top of that we have walking beats, we have bike beats, and really when you’re short, those are not the most efficient ways to deploy resources. A police officer can cover maybe three or four blocks, an officer on a bike can double or triple that but a police officer in a car can cover from one part of the city in the next so the more efficient way to police a city is have a mechanized response in a car.

However, you see that you have higher ratings when you have officers on foot beats, officers on bike beats, because they get to know the community, and it’s an officer that you see every day. People love them.

ONEK: Every community member says, I want a beat officer on my block.

BATTS: Exactly. But you can’t do that when you’re balancing resources at the same time. And it’s been made clear to me by the community that they like their PSOs, they’ve actually passed a ballot measure to make that happen. So what I have to do is kind of build around that, I’ve talked to the politicians, and had the same conversation we’re having. And said that the more
efficient way is to put them in cars, and I’ve been clear from my bosses that they want their PSOs and they like them and not to adjust them so I have to work around that.

So everything else I’ve taken officers who are on desk details whether they’re detectives or in administrative jobs, and have said, they will all work in patrol at least one day a week. So four days out of the month we have officers off a desk working black and white police cars, responding to calls and making sure that we’re deployed correctly, so we’re working around that to make sure that we use all of our resources in the most efficient way.

ONEK: Oakland, like many cities is facing a severe budget deficit, and on this show as you said we discussed the impact of the economy on policing with both San Francisco police chief George Gascon and former Los Angeles and New York Police Chief Bill Bratton. Bratton warned against the dangers of cutting funding for policing services, saying quote, the big risk now for Los Angeles and indeed America is that there is a significant disinvestment going on as it relates to our criminal justice systems. It’s like a patient who’s being treated successfully for cancer, and all of a sudden you start reducing
the radiation and chemotherapy, and the patient starts as you might expect not getting better but once again, feeling the effects of their illness.

Gascon warned against the dangers of cutting funding for social services saying quote, one of the areas that greatly concerned me was that as we increase the cost of policing we were decreasing the investment in other social services. Parks, libraries and other activities and services that should be provided by local government that actually have done well will eventually have a better impact in reducing crime than the suppression piece. Or enforcement, that law enforcement brings to the table.

Obviously, you need both to successfully enhance public safety, but Oakland’s got to cut somewhere. The politicians are probably talking to you about this. It’s a very tough issue, what are your thoughts?

BATTS: I love Gascon and I love Bratton. I find a compromise in the middle because I agree with both. I agree with Bill in that in certain types of short term issues you have to, you can’t do community policing of public relations or social services
when you have high rates of crime. You have to get those crime numbers down so you can bring those services together. People are not going to come out of their houses if they feel endangered, so Oakland has that issue. Crime is so high at this point in time, although it’s trending down, is that you have to get those numbers down so people can participate in program, and investment comes to the city.

And I believe police departments are economic drivers. And if you have bad stories coming out about crime or bad policing, that investors are not going to come to a city. So in an industrial age city that is built much like Oakland has been, been an industrial age powerhouse, it has to redo itself, it has to reengineer itself, with a different economy. And in order for that to happen you have to have a lot of investment, whether its federal funds or whether it’s from private investors to come. No one’s going to invest in a city when you have a crime rate, so you have to drop that.

For long-term sustainability like George was saying, we have to have social services. The city of Oakland is going to have to make some very tough decisions. We have a, what’s looking at now, approximately $42 million shortfall coming up here on July
1, with no clear answers. We have another retirement system issue, a backlog debt that is due March of 2011 which is about $50 million. I’ve been told to look at making cuts from, best case scenario, 89 police officers out of 803 total, to worst case scenario in November, if a ballot measure doesn’t pass, of approximately 250 police officers.

So we’re talking about devastating numbers. You know I can come and I know my craft, I know how to correct some of the issues or most of the issues in the Oakland police department, but that if that organization doesn’t grow, there’s too much demand coming into that pipeline right now and not enough resources to get the job done now today at 803. If you reduce that number it becomes even greater and problematic to be able to get any results whatsoever.

ONEK: When you talk about the discussion we’re having about response times, if you talk about wanting to have beat officers, without officers, both of those things are going to suffer.

BATTS: Well just to deploy your resources correctly, with beat integrity, we need 75 more officers over 803 today. So if you reduce that in the opposite direction you’re going to have an
inefficient run organization. I’m going to have to collapse the vast majority of detectives or anything else, we’re going to have to contract out, we’re going to be in a very tough spot. If we cut 250 officers, I just got to be honest with you, is going to be extremely tough.

ONEK: Well let’s talk about the good news, crime has declined since you’ve come on board, serious crimes, part one crimes, were down 34% in the first quarter. What do you attribute this decline to in the early days of your administration?

BATTS: Well, the first two months, which were, basically I came in at the latter part of October, so November and December was more of a diagnostic, looking at the organization. And I share with the organization January 1, my expectations are going to increase. And I don’t take excuses for an answer. I have high expectations for the organization. Our job is to provide value within the city, if we’re not providing value the way that the citizens see, there’s no reason for us to exist. And so I’ve changed the goals, I’ve come out with a strategic plan, I’ve come out with some simplistic targets that I want the organization to respond to.
And they’re responding. And I think the first six months have been trying to correct all the pieces that we, the basic function of the job, and leaning pretty heavily towards suppression-related things. The next phase that we have to get into is the prevention and intervention pieces, which may be impacted by this budgetary, you know, downfall that we’re sharing. But we really have to start coordinating better with the community as a whole, in participating.

Right now we don’t have police officers in uniform that go to neighborhood watch meetings. That’s where you get to talk to people, that’s where you get to break the barriers down. We don’t have police officers in uniform going to schools to do programs. People may say that’s not why I hire police officers but that’s where you break down those barriers and you build strong relationships. And so that’s the prevention, the intervention pieces that we’re moving forward with and that was going to be the next phase two, phase three of the plan as we go through this first year. But the budget’s going to kind of direct where we’re going, and we’ll see from there.

ONEK: You had a very successful run as chief in Long Beach, leaving with crime rates at a historic low. What’s the most
important lesson from Long Beach that you brought with you here to Oakland?

BATTS: Number one, you have to have a very well-managed, efficient organization. I believe I left a police department that was extremely efficient, very polished, very productive in a way that we got the job done. That’s number one. The other big piece is that, we are not an entity unto ourselves. We work for the community. And that we built a police department that was a customer-driven police organization. That we went out and built relationships with our community and we did what they wanted us to do with the expectations.

And so when I come to Oakland, number one as you can hear from what I’m saying, I’m trying to build a more efficient, productive, well-run, well-managed organization which is polished and professional, and highly ethical. And trying at the same time, building a greater openness to our community to listen to what the community is telling us not for us to tell them what we want them to do, but to listen to them and turn their wishes and dreams into our imperatives that we’re going to complete.
ONEK: And with your strategic plan that you mentioned, my understanding is that you took that as an early draft out to the community to get their feedback and buy-in from the very beginning.

BATTS: Absolutely. That’s the strategic plan, which is different from, number one, it’s a dynamic plan that we don’t have for five, six, seven years. It’s a three year plan that can change as we go from year to year. The most important part is that’s a customer-driven plan. We went to the customer base and asked, what do you want us to do, and based on their responses we are building a plan around their responses and we’re taking it back to the community to let them critique us in what we’re doing and to be accountable, that’s part of me going out every night and having conversations.

ONEK: When you became chief in Long Beach, you had already been on the force there for 20 years, you were the consummate insider. In Oakland of course, you came into the chief’s position as an outsider. What are the advantages and disadvantages of coming in from the outside in Oakland?

BATTS: When I took the job in Long Beach, actually, I started,
I consciously put myself in a position as if I was an outsider. And if I was coming into the organization new, what would I do, and that’s how I kind of ran that organization as if I hadn’t been there for 20 years. I’m taking that same road map coming into Oakland, doing the same things, the reality is that you don’t know what you don’t know. And so there’s a lot of learning that you have to do, there’s cultural norms within any organization you have cultural norms that you have to understand.

And I’m trying to use those cultural norms to motivate and inspire that organization, it has a very rich tradition, it was a very traditionalist police organization. I’ve been trying to use those beliefs to turn it around to a very contemporary, fast-moving, bold and innovative organization, is where I want to take it. And so we’re going to try new and different things because what they really want to be is they hearken back to the days where Oakland Police Department was seen as the cutting edge in Northern California. And I say we can do that, but we have to prove a lot of things to a lot of people and get to that point.

So they have heard that hue and cry and they’re stepping up
to the plate. And that’s why you’re seeing part of the crime reduction in the city also, because they want to do a better job in providing value to the city as a whole. But I think if I had to do it all over again coming into the city, is that I would’ve brought different team members, too. And what I’m finding is seeing that this is my first organization that I’ve gone outside is that I’m having to, that’s a lot of haves in one sentence, teaching a lot of the things that I need to do. And so instead of being able to hit the ground running, I’m having to teach where I’m going to give that insight, and if I had to do it again probably I’d do like Gascon and bring in at least one or two team members which would’ve taken some weight off of me and would’ve allowed us to move a little faster than what we’re doing.

ONEK: So it’s just you at this point, you weren’t able to bring in anyone else, Gascon was able to bring in Jeff Godown from down in LA who has been terrific in helping us in San Francisco.

BATTS: Exactly. And I’m going to steal Jeff from him and bring him over to Oakland.

ONEK: Oh, no.
BATTS: Just joking.

ONEK: But I want to talk about what the reaction has been from the command staff, and the rank and file to you coming in as an outsider. My sense is that the community was really almost demanding an outsider. What did the rank and file want, and how have they responded to you coming in?

BATTS: I’ve gotten tremendous amount of support. I get tremendous amount of emails that come in on a regular basis, phone calls, officers walking into my office, saying hey chief I want to talk to you. And in and outside of the community what I hear a lot of times is I’ve never had a chief do this. I’ve never had a chief walk a community. I’ve never seen a chief do this. What I haven’t had the opportunity to do, that I’m getting into in the next month is, actually going out in police cars, and going on ride-alongs with officers.

I think that’s critical. I’m actually going to block off an entire week where I’m going to go out on ride-alongs on all the shifts with the officers. And move from car to car and get a better understanding of what they’re dealing with as a whole.
I’ve gotten good reviews on my leadership style within the organization. Also with the command staff, same thing, I haven’t run into any major roadblocks within the police department.

I think as I shared with you when I first came in, they were looking for a change. I’m bringing change. However it cannot be too much change, that becomes overwhelming to the organization because you still need to have a stability and foundation. So I think I’m doing OK so far.

ONEK: Now, you hold a doctorate in public administration, which is very rare for a police chief. How did you manage to get through a dissertation while keeping your day job on the Long Beach PD?

BATTS: That is a good one. That was a very stressful time. Actually, what impacted that, there’s a gentleman named Lee Brown, back in the 1980s who was initially, I think he was chief of police in Portland, Oregon. Then moved to Atlanta and then moved to Houston, Texas, and I met him in the late 1980s and he had a doctorate. And at that point in time he was on the cutting edge of community policing. He was coming out with a lot of new techniques. And he impacted me so, and I always enjoyed
So I went back to get my doctorate in the 1990s. It was very demanding, it was very tough, especially being a single dad and trying to give the time that the kids needed at the same time of doing, completing a research degree. But it has worked very well for me, I think I call on the experience that I learned going through that on a daily basis. And it allows me to look outside of what I know to bring in answers.

ONEK: How did your fellow officers react to your academic career?

BATTS: I guess as I was coming up, I think they saw the growth. I didn’t initially see the growth in myself, I was just completing the coursework but there would be times we were in meetings. And concepts would come from me that going through the doctoral program helped me to see, and they would kind of go, wow, and I heard comments of, where did he get that from? And they had this sense of amazement, the different things I was coming up with. And so I had a balance, I just wasn’t this pointy-head guy who was going to school, I also earned my career and I worked all over the police organization so I brought a
degree of credibility.

However I was very young, I promoted very quickly through the organization. So I had to allow my youth to catch up with the wisdom and the other pieces of credibility that you need as you’re growing in. And I think I’ve impacted a number of officers because people come to me all the time and they say, I’m going for my doctorate. I’ve seen you, I’ve watched what you’ve done. So I think I’ve become kind of like a road map to several young officers.

ONEK: Now the San Francisco Bay Area is home to a number of police chiefs with national reputations. Yourself, George Gascon in San Francisco, Ron Davis in East Palo Alto who is now a finalist for the chief’s position in Seattle, Mike Meehan in Berkeley who just came down from Seattle, Susan Manheimer in San Mateo who is the new president of the California Police Chiefs Association and others, to what extent are you working with these other chiefs on regional strategies to fight crime in the Bay Area, because it seems like there are a lot of people now who bring a lot of innovative ideas. Crime obviously doesn’t stay confined in a certain city. We know that there are issues that affect all these communities, to what
extent as busy as each of you are in your own organizations, are you able to work together on regional issues?

BATTS: George Gascon and I come from the same area in Southern California and George and I have known each other for a number of years, 20 plus years, and at right before George left LAPD to become chief in Mesa, Arizona, he was in charge of patrol which abutted my city of Long Beach. So we have a long history of working together in Southern California. And Bill Bratton, actually, made a big impression here. Bill was one of the catalysts to deal with regionalization. Having officers talk to other officers, prior to that Long Beach was an entity unto itself.

LAPD had been a really large agency of 10,000 strong, did its own thing. LA County Sheriff’s the same way. So we didn’t have those opportunities to break down those silos until Bratton came. So George and I have grown up in that mechanism of sharing. So when we got up here, George and I reached out to each other immediately. And we set up a meeting and we started talking and we brought other chiefs into that circle. I have a, as a matter of fact, tomorrow morning at about 10:00 I have a meeting that I’ve hosted every, once a month we bring in
San Francisco PD, Berkeley PD, San Leandro, Alameda, Alameda Sheriff’s, all the agencies around the Oakland periphery.

And we sit and we talk about crime, we start addressing crime, we start working together as a whole. George and I have talked about not only doing that, I’m doing it on this side, the East Bay, although San Francisco comes over, but George and I have talked to other chiefs about doing that around the bay area as a whole. And Ron Davis is on board, who’s another good friend I’ve known for 25 years, and so is Rob Davis who is down in San Jose. So we are all, all the people that you mentioned, are having conversations right now to start dealing with crime on a regional basis around the bay area as a whole.

ONEK: Anthony Batts, thanks so much for joining us. Please tune in next week when we’ll be joined by Kevin Grant, Oakland’s street outreach coordinator, who was previously incarcerated. Thank you for listening to the Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast. You can find this episode of the podcast and all prior episodes on our website at www.law.berkeley.edu/cjconversations and on iTunes. You can also become a fan of the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast on Facebook and can follow the podcast on Twitter at cjconversations. The podcast is engineered by Milt
Wallace, our editor is Callie Shenafelt and our program intern is Sheridan Bloch. I’m David Onek, thanks for listening.